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Only days into a new year and already gamers eager for the next generation to begin have so much to be excited about. Nintendo's Wii U and the latest updates to popular Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 franchises have kept twitchy fingers busy through festive gaming sessions, but we are all eager for more. After one of the longest console generations on record, 2013 will see both Microsoft and Sony unveiling their secrets for the next incarnations of Xbox and PlayStation. With console code names and slipped secrets filling the news pages, you can feel the anticipation rising, and it will explode when we get to June and E3.

Having played through every games machine transition from 8-bit to the present day, I have to say it's a great time for me personally to be returning to **games™**. So many familiar names are still going strong – *Metal Gear Solid*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Tomb Raider* and *Castlevania* to name but a few. You should, however, read nothing into the fact that I return with a young Lara Croft on my arm – it's great to see the series getting a reboot and we have exclusive access to the multiplayer game this issue – but I'm a married man!

Enjoy the issue.

Nick Roberts

Nick Roberts
EDITOR IN CHIEF




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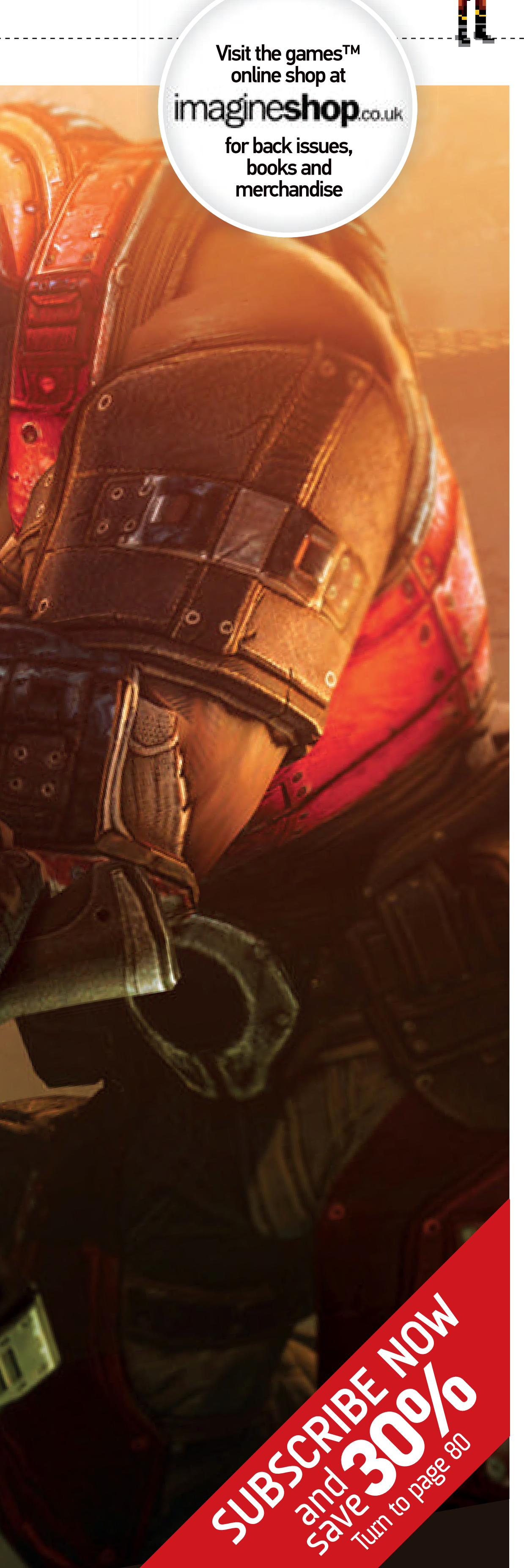


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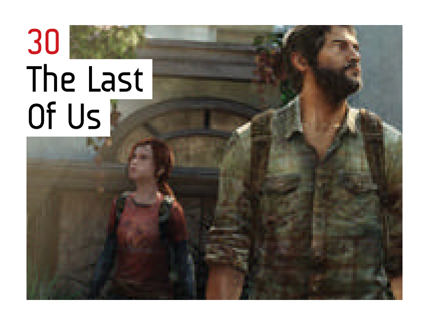


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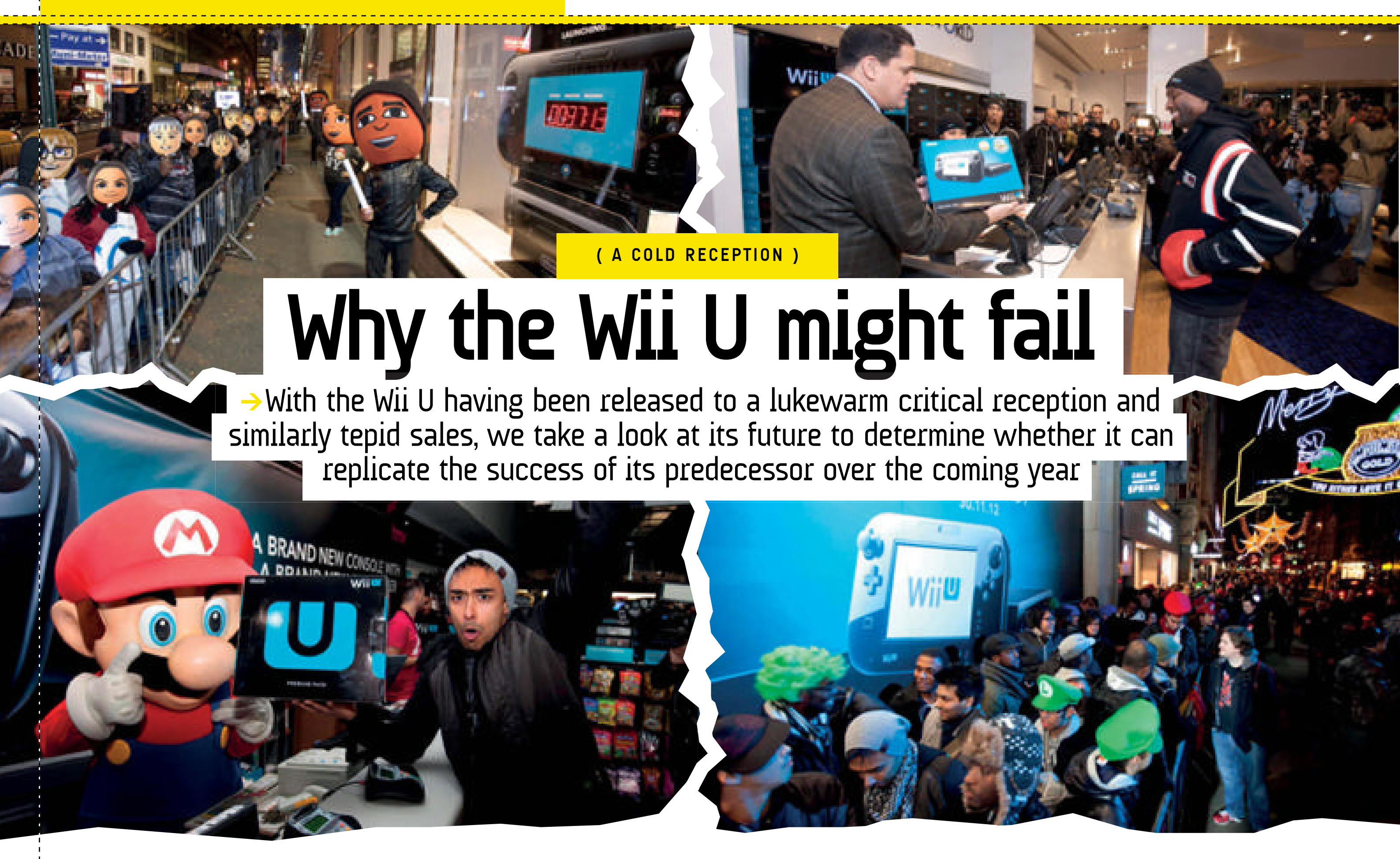


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(A COLD RECEPTION)

Why the Wii U might fail

→ With the Wii U having been released to a lukewarm critical reception and similarly tepid sales, we take a look at its future to determine whether it can replicate the success of its predecessor over the coming year

The Wii U's launch, at the time of writing, can be considered a modest success at best. In the US, consumers snapped up 400,000 units in the opening week – a number less than impressive when compared to the Wii's 600,000 units moved in its first eight days on sale, and even less so when compared to the 750,000 Xbox 360 units moved in the same period. In the UK the Wii U sold just 40,000 units in its first 48 hours, the lower-than-expected sales attributed to a shortage of bricks-and-mortar retail stocks. Embarrassingly, not one Wii U title managed to squeeze into the UK's top ten for the week of the console's launch, with the bundled *Nintendo Land* only just making it to number 11.

Of course, one week's worth of data is nowhere near enough to put the nail in the coffin; there's plenty of time for Wii to build momentum and strike out on a more successful path. However, it's an undeniably weak start out of the gate, even more so when you consider the somewhat indifferent critical reception and the sizeable day-one patch that saw early adopters of the Wii U spend their first hours with the console staring at a progress bar. If the Wii U is to now turn its fortunes around and start picking up momentum, it's going to need to play its cards very carefully indeed – and currently, signs aren't looking good for the coming months.

Wii U's success in 2013 will be determined largely by its software, and in that regard the console's short term seems rather unimpressive. Right now *New Super Mario Bros* and *Nintendo Land* stand as solid crowd-pleasers, and they're bolstered by a rich catalogue of meatier, hardcore titles like *Mass Effect* and *Black Ops 2*, but there's nevertheless nothing in the launch line-up that will sell the machine in the same way *Wii Sports* did for the Wii.

The start of the year is beginning to look barren too, with titles like *Pikmin 3* and *Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate* pushed back until March. This year in the UK, in fact, sees very little happening before the third month, with *Ninja Gaiden: Razor's Edge* hitting in January, *Scribblenauts Unlimited* – a launch title in the US – not out until February, and *LEGO City Undercover* still operating under a vague 'early 2013' release date. The real meat, meanwhile – namely *Bayonetta 2* and a new *Zelda* – remain unknown quantities.

PAST MARCH, THINGS should probably start to pick up, with the Wii U's graphics and more traditional controls making it compatible with the kinds of games that third-

Above Convincing the casual crowd to splash out £300 on a new console isn't going to be quite so easy for Nintendo this time around, nor will be persuading hardcore gamers that they shouldn't wait a few months to see what Microsoft and Sony have up their sleeves.

> "Third-party publishers are being very cautious with the Wii U. We're not seeing many Wii U-specific titles"
>
> Eric Handler, MKM Partners

DATA STREAM → THQ FILES FOR BANKRUPCEY, LUCKILY IT'S ALREADY GOT A BUYER IN PLACE

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Your guide to the essential stories

party publishers put out. Yet despite this, there's cause for concern in the long term too.

While developers have frequently commended Wii U's decent GPU and comparatively generous 2GB of RAM (four times the amount available on the Xbox 360), they have also repeatedly voiced concerns over its underpowered processor. Indeed, a hacker recently claimed that the Wii U CPU is significantly less capable than that of the 360 and PS3, something that Eurogamer's Digital Foundry confirmed. This has raised questions about the console's ability to handle elements such as AI and physics when developers seek to port over titles. In an economical climate where publishers have to release games on multiple consoles and PC to make a profit, it's a genuine concern for Wii U to already be lagging behind the curve with weaknesses you would not expect on a system released seven years after the debut of the 360. Nintendo could very well have a hard time proving to third parties that it's worth their while wrestling with new hardware, particularly so as we find out what Sony and Microsoft have planned.

AND THAT'S THE biggest worry. Although Nintendo's Reggie Fils-Aime has tried to downplay it, there's an elephant in the room: a new Xbox is rumoured to be coming as early as Q4 this year, with a PlayStation 3 successor not far off. These true next-generation consoles will no doubt be considerably more powerful than the Wii U – likely with a far superior CPU and double the RAM – leaving the console one or two years at the most to make its mark before it's once again trailing behind in the technological arms race. Nintendo's ability to sell its new console in the face of graphically superior competitors, likely with tablet-style innovations of their own, will be no mean feat.

It's not all doom and gloom – there are interesting developments that we haven't yet discussed. Nintendo's support of the Unity3D engine – quickly becoming one of the most broadly used engines by handheld developers today – and ease of access for indie titles to the Nintendo eShop indicate a great deal of potential in the smaller games market. Also, the near-field communication technology (NFC) in the pad is an as-of-yet untapped resource – just look at Activision's *Skylanders* for proof of that.





Still, these aren't the kind of developments that made Wii such a success. What did was its ability to turn our mums, dads, uncles and aunties into gamers, but times have changed. That casual market has now migrated onto the more easily accessible experiences provided by Facebook and iPad, and the Wii U's new ideas feel less like genuine innovation and more of an attempt to fit with the hardcore-focused crowd; only just now catching up with better connected content and entertainment hub experiences. It doesn't feel as new or exciting as the Wii, and it doesn't feel like it's positioned well enough to draw in the audiences that made that console such a huge success.

Even with completely solid execution on the part of Nintendo, the Wii U is at real risk of becoming nothing more than a stopgap between one generation and the next, doomed to share only the briefest period of graphical equilibrium with its peers before it's once again left in the dust. Only time will tell its fortunes. But let's not forget, Nintendo does have that pesky habit of proving everybody wrong…

Above Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto has pledged support to third parties, but more so when they're committing themselves to an experience only the Wii U can provide. While Wii simplified gaming, Wii U has done something of the opposite, something that might put off the casual demographic Wii brought in.

Right Reggie Fils-Aime has downplayed claims that the Wii U will become irrelevant following the introduction of the new Xbox and PlayStation, saying that "faster processors and pretty pictures won't be enough to motivate consumers," and that innovation is key.

THE INDUSTRY'S ANALYSTS ON WII U

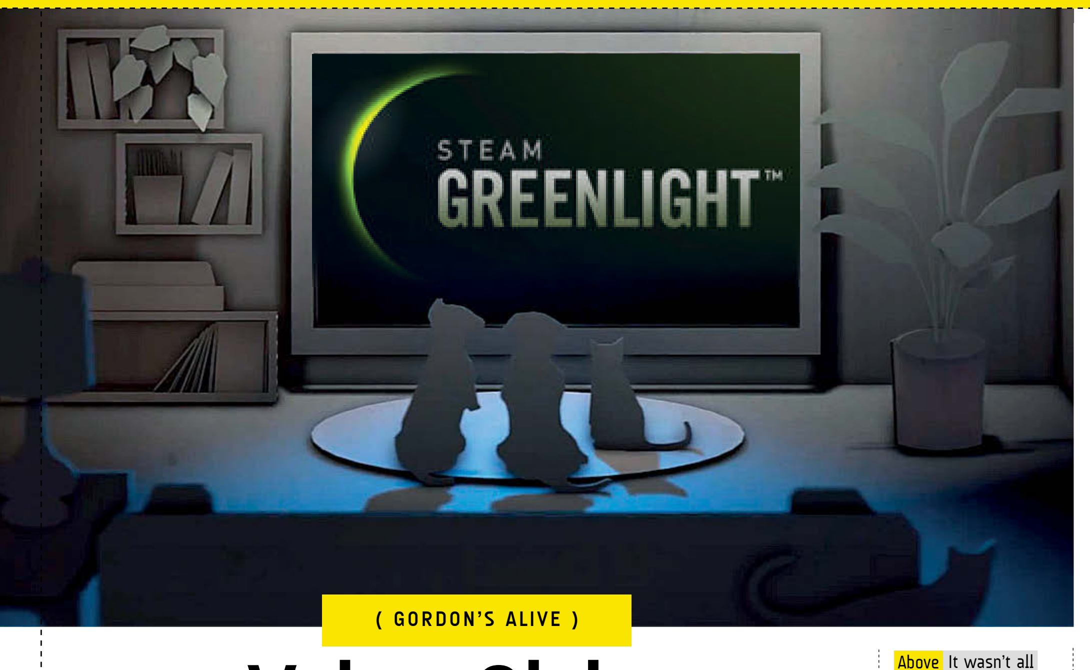
"WHEN NEXT-GEN consoles come out they're doing to be better than the Wii U. *Call Of Duty* is amazing on the Wii U this year. The problem with playing *Call Of Duty* online is it's a community and if there's only four people playing it on the Wii U it's no fun. Nobody in their right mind would buy a Wii U and say 'I'm going to play *Call Of Duty*'. That's like saying 'I gave up Facebook, and it's Google+ now'."
Michael Pachter, Wedbush Securities

"ALL OF the third-party publishers are being very cautious with the Wii U. We're not seeing many Wii U-specific titles. They're ports. No one is really pouring a lot of money into it right now… Third-party publishers recognise that Nintendo garners the lion's share of the software market for its own platforms. And it's very tough to change that."
Eric Handler, MKM Partners

"THIS TIME around, Wii U's pure innovation, coupled with a limited volume of high-quality Nintendo software, will not be enough to drive the ongoing sales momentum we witnessed with the Wii console, especially at a higher price point. Long-term success depends on ongoing consumer engagement delivered through the constant release of high-quality content from first and third parties, a competitive non-games entertainment proposition and a sound digital and online strategy to go along with such innovation. Nintendo is still some way short of delivering a comprehensive engagement-led value proposition at the launch of the Wii U."
Piers Harding-Rolls, IHS

"ONE THING that could keep demand strong well into the summer is a new game we don't know about… The other is if Nintendo is successful in explaining to people why the asynchronous play and the tablets are really, really fun. Nintendo needs to demonstrate that the tablet, dropped into a 3D world, enables the user to see… and do things… not possible on any other system right now. If they ramp that into a fun factor of 10X and communicate that, I think they can sustain the momentum."
John Taylor, Arcadia

 THIEVES HAVE MADE OFF WITH 7,000 WII U CONSOLES IN AN AIRPORT HEIST 



(GORDON'S ALIVE)

Valve: Giving the Greenlight

→ Steam's helping hand for indie developers has been equally hailed and disparaged. We spoke to some of those who were there on day one to find out what they think of Greenlight

Recent years have seen the emergence of indie developers as more than just creators of niche interest titles in PC and console gaming. No longer are they the outsiders: indies are making waves like never before and are, in many ways, coming to define the industry far more than the publisher-bereft developers of games not focus-tested within an inch of their lives ever have done before.

But this brave new world where the outsiders are slowly but surely becoming the establishment is still developing, and it still needs the money men to offer help wherever it can be offered. At least, as long as there's a bit more money to be made. Rewind to the end of August 2012 and you see the emergence of Steam Greenlight: Valve's addition to the dominant digital distribution outlet that allowed any developer to put their game out there, to have it seen potentially by millions and, if voted on enough, to secure a release through the very service it was being showcased on. It was, on paper, one of the biggest and best steps for the visibility and earning potential of indie gaming that had ever been taken.

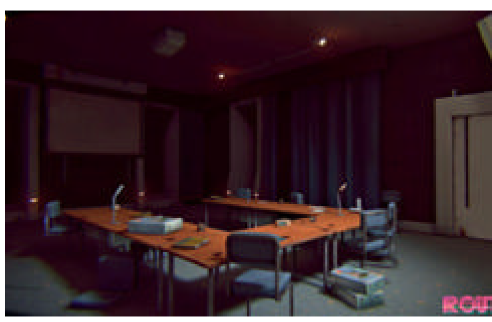
But in practice, there were issues. From day one the service was inundated with submissions, many of them obscene or inappropriate, thus leaving legitimate developers unable to gain any traction on their own, genuine submissions. To counter these issues, Valve introduced a submission fee – a small charge to curtail the prevalence of illegitimate submissions. Except the fee, while donated to the Child's Play charity, wasn't exactly of the token variety: it weighed in at £70/$100 (and still stands to this day). For an indie title developed by a lone individual with literally zero budget, it certainly isn't an amount of money you would want to pay with absolutely no guarantee of success attached to it.

We've moved on from these teething issues, however, and with Valve now allowing conceptual submissions to be made for free, allowing developers to gauge interest before laying down their cash, it's now at least more open to the cash-strapped submitters. But some things stick in this world, and the opening salvo of negativity against Greenlight has left deeper scars than Valve would ever likely admit - the service isn't universally derided as it was just a few months ago, but wherever you turn you will read, see or hear opinions that put Greenlight under a very *negative* light.

> “I think it's a shame that Greenlight has gotten so much negative feedback”
> Aaron Foster, Lunar Software

Above It wasn't all praise for Greenlight from those we spoke to, but the positives far outweighed any niggling, easily fixed negatives they might have pointed out.

Below *Routine*, being made by a three-person British studio, is a beautiful-looking first-person horror game set on an abandoned moon base.



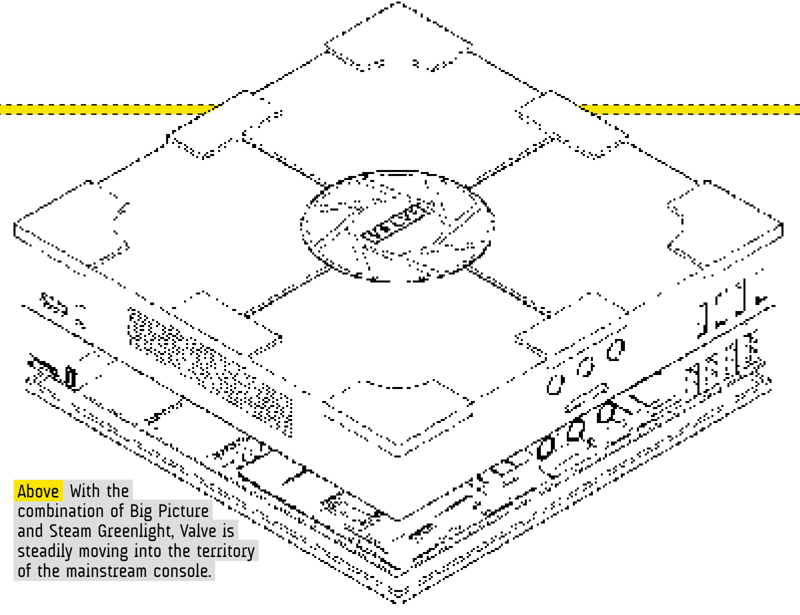
SOME OF THOSE who had games okayed in the very first wave of Greenlight approvals were keen to speak to **games™**, however, and have their views heard. Sam Reid, designer at HyperSloth (www.hypersloth.co.uk), currently working on *Dream*, summed his feelings up simply: “I think it has got a lot of undeserved bad press; it's a great service for independents to show their game and hopefully get it on one of the best platforms in the world.”

Chris Hunt, creating *Kenshi* at Lo-Fi Games (www.lofigames.com), held similar praise for the service: “To be honest I can't really fault it, but then I probably got the most benefit out of it out of everyone. I had a game already

Below *Dream* is a first-person puzzle/adventure game and, though Greenlit, has been searching for additional funding.




RUMOURS SUGGEST THAT PUBLISHER THQ WILL SELL OFF WARHAMMER 40,000 MMO DARK MILLENNIUM ONLINE



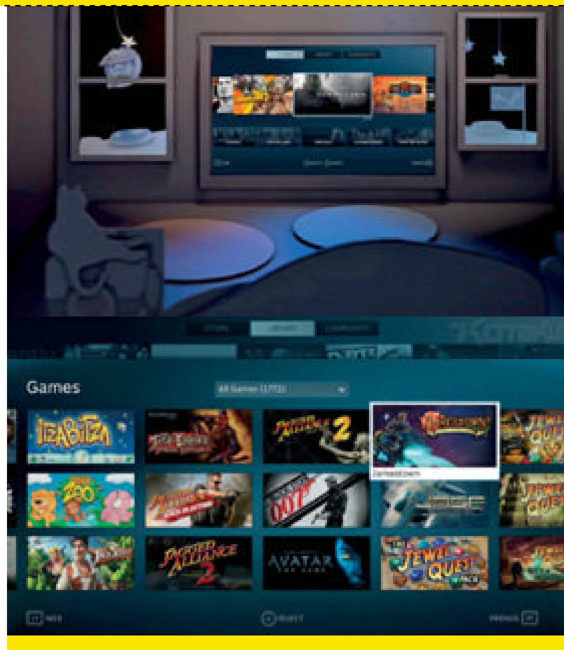
Above With the combination of Big Picture and Steam Greenlight, Valve is steadily moving into the territory of the mainstream console.

selling at just the right time, then first in, first greenlighted. I think Greenlight is a great thing, and has opened up the bulk of the market to us indies." Lunar Software's (www.lunar-software.com) Aaron Foster, part of the team making *Routine*, also threw his weight behind the defence of Valve: "I think it's a shame that Greenlight has gotten so much negative feedback when all it tried to do was fix something that was a bit broken before."

BUT IT'S MORE than just the obvious 'it is as good as it was helpful' – there's an understanding coming from Valve that just wouldn't be present elsewhere, as Hunt told us: "They asked me for an estimated release date and I said a year or two, so they were basically like 'okay, well get back to us when you're ready then, no rush'." Foster, with Lunar's game similarly early on in development, also praised the company: "*Routine* is still early in development and Valve has been very supportive so far."

But probably the biggest boon to any indie is the potential for visibility that comes from being on Steam, as Ash Sidebottom of HyperSloth pointed out: "Most of our fans at the moment came directly from there so we have Steam and the Community's support to thank for where we are now." Hunt was even more effusive with his praise of Greenlight's effect: "As an alpha-funded indie, traffic skyrocketed and my sales were 15x higher in the first month. Now it's steadily going along at about half that. There wasn't a vast noticing by the press, but it's made a phenomenal difference and stabilised me as a business."

It's still early days for Greenlight and the service is still growing, changing and finding its feet. Many more developers will pay the entry and take their chances over the coming years, so it's good to get some straightforward advice from the pioneers of this brave new indie world. Foster had this warning: "It is a worthwhile endeavour, but just make sure you have enough content to really spark some interest." And Hunt had similar words of caution: "Don't put anything on there until you are ready. Nobody cares about concept projects; make sure you have something to show. Proper gameplay screenshots, preferably a video. It's different to showing your game within developer communities: Steam users are ordinary gamers and they can be harsh."



THE WHOLE PICTURE?

Valve moves into the living room with Big Picture

RUMOURS OF the 'Steam Box' - Valve's purported dedicated gaming device - received a huge boost (some might say 'confirmation') as news came out from the company that it is planning to release a Linux-powered, dedicated device to bring PC gaming to the living room. But while we wait for more news and the inevitable release of the device, we can see first-hand Valve's opening strides in its move to take over more than just the world of PCs. Big Picture - more than just a display tweak to give the service more usability on HDTVs - has been acknowledged by Gabe Newell as a part of Valve's move towards getting its own dedicated hardware in the living room. Some see it as a resolution tweak - a button to press that lets you control Steam with a pad - but those paying attention to Valve know that this is just one small part of the big plans the company has; plans far bigger than any Big Picture we've seen so far.

EXTRA CREDIT

>TECH



WII MINI

Currently available only in Canada, Nintendo has its mince pies fixed on the Christmas marketplace with its tidy-looking Wii Mini. The hardware revision is noticeably flimsier than its progenitor and, weirdly, the new model isn't *that* much leaner. Nevertheless, with a lower price point it should give Canadians something to shout about.

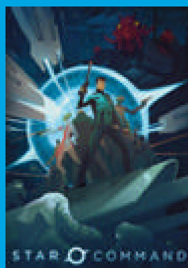
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CAPCOM TO CONTINUE THE MEGA MAN PARTY

3DS fans rejoice, after the good times the world has felt following the release of *Street Fighter X Mega Man*, Capcom is continuing the 25th anniversary celebration with the launch of the first six *Mega Man* games onto the Nintendo 3DS eShop. *Mega Man 2* is dropping on 7 Feb; the rest will follow in the next few months.



>GAME

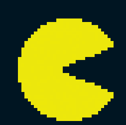


STAR COMMAND PREPPED FOR RELEASE

Star Command has been a long time coming but, after two successful Kickstarters, a release date is finally set for late January. Think *Game Dev Story* meets *Star Trek* and you're on the right path. It features gorgeous retro-pixel art aesthetics and *X-COM*-style encounters.




CRYSIS 2 WAS THE MOST PIRATED VIDEOGAME OF 2011 ACCORDING TO A STUDY BY WEBSITE TORRENTFREAK.COM



(I'M GONNA WRECK IT)

Behind The Scenes: Wreck-It Ralph

→ How Disney's latest animated venture marries classic gaming icons in one cinematic celebration



It's beyond the point where we need to mention how grievously misrepresented videogames have been by cinema over the years. Impoverished by a fundamental lack of understanding, film directors and producers have been quick to snag popular gaming properties and reimagine them on the silver screen with little reverence paid to the source.

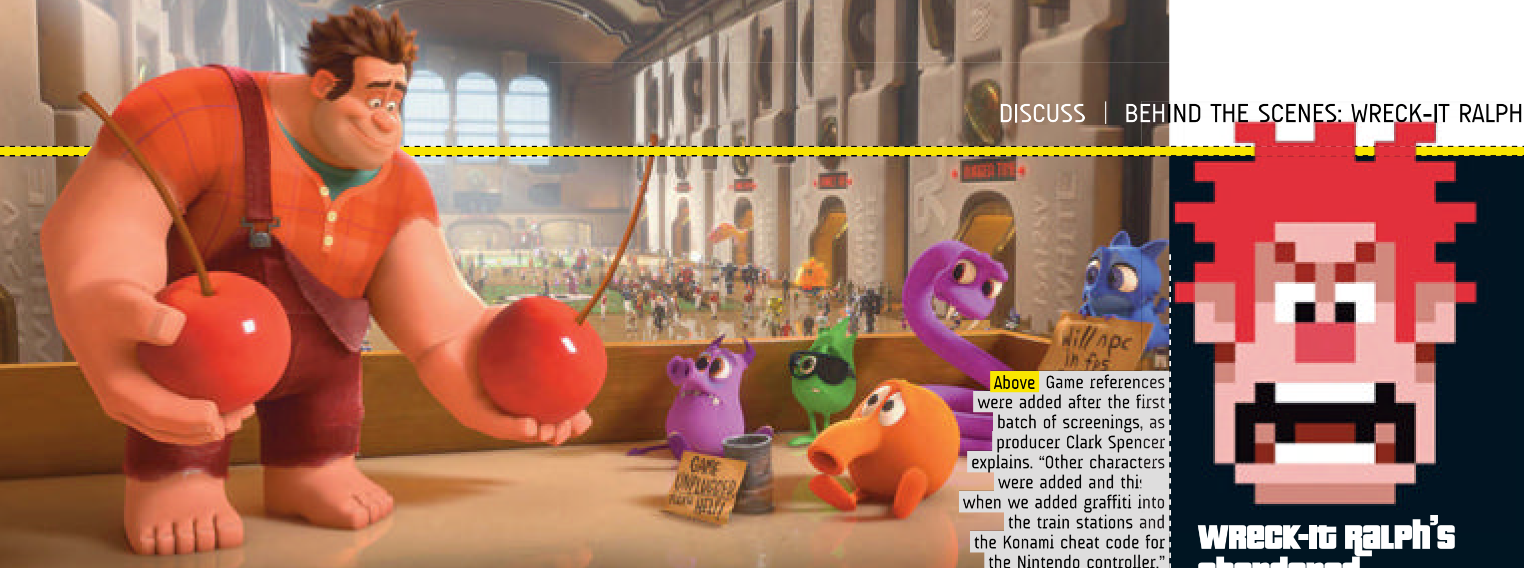
Disney's next animated venture *Wreck-It Ralph* is, of course, quite different from your interminable *Resident Evil* adaptations, the *Max Payne* disasters and anything that has given Uwe Boll something to do in between punching journalists. An original animated tale set within a world populated by arcade characters of the Eighties and Nineties, the eponymous Ralph is the nemesis within the *Fix-It Felix* 8-bit arcade platformer who has grown tired of being labelled the bad guy and starts exploring the other game worlds.

But one aspect of the story that has captured the imagination of gamers in droves is the host of recognisable faces from pixels past, gathered together in a modern day *Roger Rabbit* of the gaming age. Ralph's cabinet compatriots include Pac-Man, Mario and Q*bert, not to mention a whole host of other cameos from recognisable – even if not name-checked – characters from a bygone era of videogames. But *Wreck-It Ralph*'s producer Clark Spencer admits it took several years for Disney to fully flesh out the story and find a way to treat the subject matter with due respect. "The idea of doing a movie, set in the world of videogames, had been kicking around at Disney for many years," says Spencer, "but no one could crack the story." It took Rich Moore, a veteran of *The Simpsons* and *Futurama* who joined Disney in 2008 to not only bolster the story, but to bring an infectious love of videogame

Left The film's official website has a *Fix-It-Felix* browser game that can be played. The goal is to fix as many windows as possible on the apartment block before knocking Ralph off the top of the building.




LIGHTNING RETURNS TO FINAL FANTASY XIII WITH A PRETTY INTERESTING NEW LOOK, FIND THE TRAILER ONLINE



Above Game references were added after the first batch of screenings, as producer Clark Spencer explains. "Other characters were added and thi: when we added graffiti into the train stations and the Konami cheat code for the Nintendo controller."

culture that would ensure that the project would finally get off the ground. "John Lasseter (chief creative officer for Disney and Pixar) asked Rich to explore the world of videogames," says Spencer. "Being a huge gamer, Rich accepted the challenge happily. Rich was immediately attracted to the idea that videogame characters are programmed to do one thing and one thing only. It was the perfect world to set a story about a guy who is having an existential crisis. After doing the same job for thirty years, he is beginning to wonder if there isn't something more to life."

NATURALLY, JUST as integral to selling the world that Ralph inhabits are the film's many references and cameos related to established videogame properties. From the beginning, both Spencer and Moore embarked on securing recognisable gaming mascots, but the process was fraught with difficulties. "As the producer on the film, I always worried about whether we would be able to licence the rights to these real videogame characters," admits Spencer. "Rich and I came up with a strategy. We wanted to wait to approach the companies until the story was in a solid place and we had art to showcase the worlds. It was risky to wait but we wanted to put our best foot forward."

As it transpired, the ideal opportunity to approach the multitude of developers and rights owners turned out to be at E3, with Moore and Spencer meeting with executives at the trade event back in June 2011. "All of the companies were there: Namco, Nintendo, Capcom, Sega," says Spencer. "With each of them, we pitched the movie, showing storyboards and art, and talked about how we wanted their characters to be a part of the story. The companies loved the idea of the story and because of the success of previous movies like *Roger Rabbit* and *Toy Story*, I believe they knew the film could be a great place to showcase great characters."

> "The problem is that you only have ninety minutes to tell your story. You don't want to take a detour for Mario"
>
> Clark Spencer, producer

It was also vital to invite the developers to have critical input into how each of the characters would be portrayed throughout the film. This boiled down not just to character design and animations, but also plot and dialogue. "We wanted them to go on the journey of making the film with us," details Spencer. "We told them they could approve the script pages, the model of their character and even the final animation and lighting. This was critical. While it made production on the film more complicated, it ensured we were being true to the characters – even things like how Bowser would hold a coffee cup – and it gave the game companies confidence that we would treat their characters appropriately. As a result, the process was fairly smooth and working with these companies was amazing."

Spencer talks of minute details that would

Below The game worlds that Ralph visits are inspired by particular videogames. *Hero's Duty* is a clear nod to *Call Of Duty*, while *Fix-It Felix* is a classic *Donkey Kong*-esque platformer, and *Sugar Rush* – a vibrant racer – takes its cue from *Mario Kart*.

WRECK-IT RALPH'S ABANDONED GTA-LIKE WORLD

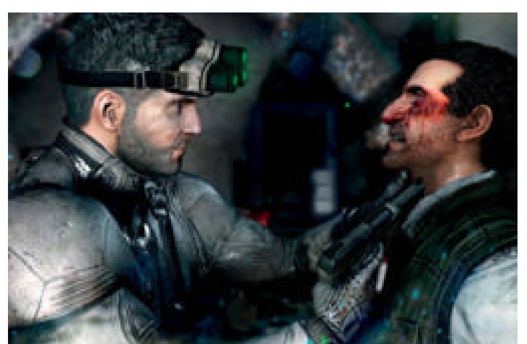
■ Director Rich Moore included a fourth game world that Ralph would visit during the story. The conceit behind this omitted game space was a more modern setting with contemporary references, as producer Clark Spencer explains. "We always wanted to include modern game characters," he says. "In fact, for the first two years of development there was a great world called *Extreme E-Z Livin'2*. It was a combination of *The Sims* and *Grand Theft Auto* done Disney style. Everyone loved the world. At the end of the second act when all was lost for Ralph, he went there because there were no good guys, no bad guys, there were just guys. It was a world without judgment. But it didn't belong in an arcade and it was tough to introduce a fourth game world so late in the movie. Ultimately we had to drop it."



SCOTT PILGRIM MULTIPLAYER DLC ISN'T DEAD AFTER ALL, EXPECT A RELEASE DATE IN THE NEW YEAR

ON THE ROAD TO HOLLYWOOD

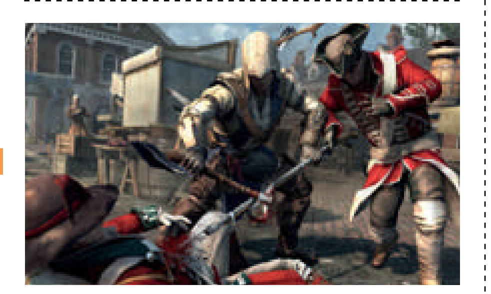
→ A rundown of the latest movies based on videogames to go into production



SPLINTER CELL

STUDIO: New Regency

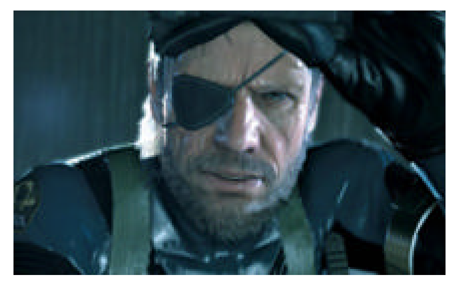
■ Ubisoft's film arm has been whirling into motion over the past few months, announcing cinematic adaptations of two of its most popular franchises. British actor-cum-mumbling-Batman-nemesis Tom Hardy has signed on to both produce and star in a *Splinter Cell* adaptation, which will see the *Inception* actor play against type and conceal the top half of his face with a mask. The script is currently being penned by Eric Warren Singer – writer of the interminably dull *The International.*



ASSASSIN'S CREED

STUDIO: New Regency

■ Like Hardy, Michael Fassbender has signed on to Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* adaptation as both producer and star. No word yet on which of the protagonists the Irish actor will embody (or whether he'll play a new character), but the studio is eyeing up a 2014 release. Meanwhile, Danny Wallace waits patiently by the phone.



METAL GEAR SOLID

STUDIO: Columbia Pictures

■ The Sony-owned Columbia Pictures has greenlit an adaptation of *Metal Gear Solid*, from *X-Men* and *Iron Man* producer Avi Arad. Arad has multiple videogame properties in development, including *Pac-Man*, *Uncharted* and *InFamous*. Hideo Kojima has expressed interest in Hugh Jackman donning the bandana as the iconic Solid Snake.



UNCHARTED

STUDIO: Columbia Pictures

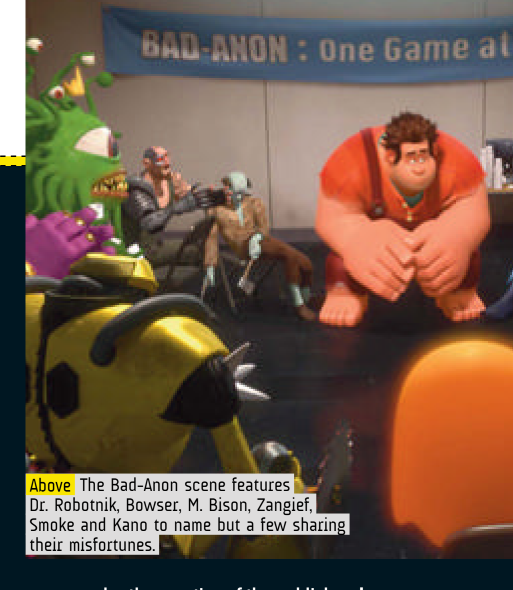
■ Having gone through several directors (including the director David O. Russell who helmed the Oscar winning *The Fighter*), the film is currently undergoing an extensive rewrite at the hands of *National Treasure* scribes Marianne and Cormac Wibberley. The internet's campaign for Nathan Fillion to star is still ongoing.



ANGRY BIRDS

STUDIO: Rovio Entertainment

■ Rovio is self-financing the cinematic adaptation of its squawking bird-flinging app, with the animated feature set to land in cinemas during the summer of 2016. It's attracted the attention of a couple of the producers behind *Despicable Me* and *Iron Man* to work on the feature.



Above The Bad-Anon scene features Dr. Robotnik, Bowser, M. Bison, Zangief, Smoke and Kano to name but a few sharing their misfortunes.

come under the scrutiny of the publishers' gaze – such as minor quibbles concerning Dr. Robotnik's height compared to Bowser – but ultimately the animators were afforded plenty of artistic expression. "We had a certain amount of creative freedom but also wanted to be respectful to the individual franchises and be as authentic as possible," says visual effects animator Thom Wickes. "I remember being given specific reference for the fireballs that Bowser spat out, so while I was able to have some space for creativity they still had to be Bowser's fireballs."

BOWSER'S APPEARANCE takes place during the *Wreck-It Ralph*'s primary assemblage of familiar gaming characters – Neff from *Altered Beast*, M. Bison and Zangief from *Street Fighter II* and Kano from *Mortal Kombat*, to name but a few – during a Villains Anonymous (Bad-Anon) session. Such a collision of so many disparate franchises in one family-friendly animated movie presented its own unique challenges – namely in toning down some of the more naturally occurring adult themes in videogames. "I actually worked on the Zombie/Kano shot in the Bad-Anon sequence," reveals Wickes. "It was a lot of fun trying to make family-friendly gore. I don't think many people have gotten to work on blood in Disney movies in the past so it was certainly a unique experience."

"I do not think the movie could have worked without real game characters," adds ting the importance of each licenced character's role. "We are setting a movie in the world of videogames. Everyone knows and understands this world. We need to ground that world and make the ice believe it really exists. The only way to do that is to include characters the audience knows and loves with the original characters we have created for the movie."

But while Disney had success partnering with various



VALVE PULLED THE WAR Z FROM STEAM AFTER FANS COMPLAINED IT FAILED TO MEET EXPECTATIONS





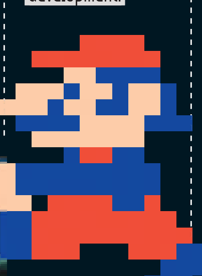
publishers to secure appearances for gaming characters, Moore and his team avoided frivolous cameos that served little narrative purpose. While Sonic, Pac-Man and Bowser slotted logically into various roles, there are sadly some notable exclusions – namely one portly plumber.

"We could not find an organic way to include Mario," admits Spencer. "The problem is that you only have ninety minutes to tell your story. You don't want to stop the film to take a detour for Mario (although we were tempted!)" Director Moore has stated that an inevitable sequel will produce a significant role for Nintendo's enduring icon, with the Kyoto-based publisher willing to lend Mario out to Disney. However, obtaining the rights to some characters proved too complicated, as decades of publisher back-and-forth, generation rebranding and several design iterations created a tangled net of legal issues that prevented much beloved icons making it into the film.

"There were cases where multiple companies owned the rights to the same character and so we knew that could get complicated," says Spencer, with regret. "For example, we had a great idea for Ms. Pac-Man but ended up dropping it because the licensing rights included several companies." There are several instances where Disney had to drop inventive ideas involving hallowed properties, both due to convoluted rights issues and, in some cases, a simple lack of time.

Above Originally the game was going to be set inside a contemporary console, like an Xbox. It wasn't until director Rich Moore came on board that the concept was altered to include arcade cabinets as the hub for the characters.

Below Sadly, Mario doesn't make an actual appearance in *Wreck-It Ralph*, despite the blessing of Nintendo. Disney hopes to have a role for the iconic plumber in the sequel already in development.



"I remember a scene from the original script where Centipede was required to take all of his shoes off in Game Central Station in order to pass through security," Spencer recalls with a smile. "That scene made me laugh out loud. Unfortunately we had to lose it from the film for time reasons."

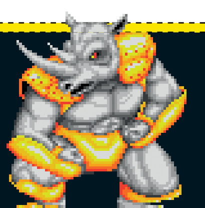
DESPITE THESE missed opportunities, the film remains an unparalleled cinematic celebration of gaming culture past. What comes as a surprise is its refusal to pander to modern gamers – though one of the games Ralph visits is a play on a popular first-person shooter – instead indulging in timeless mascots and forgotten heroes. It's a union that has the profound ability to transcend generational gaps and remain relevant throughout the ages.

"I have always loved videogames," says Spencer. "I am going to date myself here, but I remember when my neighbours got *Pong* for Christmas. Much to my parents' chagrin, I pretty much camped out at my neighbours' house for the next several months. I was hooked. I soon moved on to *Pac-Man* and *Dig Dug* followed by *Tetris* and *Mario Kart*. But what's amazing is that the videogame characters from the Eighties are still a part of culture in 2012.

"Videogames have been around for forty years and I think one of the reasons the movie is playing so well to a broad audience is because people in their forties and fifties ...'ed and loved these characters. And the young kids obviously play different games today but they are still aware of Pac-Man or Sonic or Bowser. The timing for the movie seems perfect."

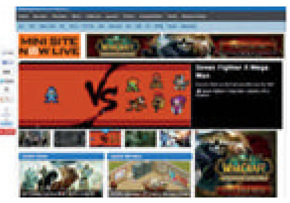
> "I do not think the movie could have worked without real game characters"
> Clark Spencer, producer





FURTHER READING

NowGamer.com



With Christmas long gone, NowGamer.com is looking at the year ahead and what's in store on the gaming calendar. If you're looking for the latest skinny on *Grand Theft Auto V*, interviews with the *BioShock Infinite* team and a whole host of other gaming goodness to kick your new year off with a bang, then you'll find no better place on the web.

All About Space



In issue 8 of *All About Space* you'll discover all of the exciting developments in space travel that will be happening in the next 12 months in the Space Race 2013 cover feature. Inside are also articles on ten amazing exoplanets, the dwarf planet Eris, inflatable spacecraft, antimatter drives, pulsars and much more, including a tribute to the late Sir Patrick Moore.

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 FIRST DLC FOR STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC IS COMING SPRING 2013, CALLED THE RISE OF THE HUTT CARTEL 

#TRENDING
with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



The reaction to the mysterious Phantom Pain reveal at the VGAs tells us a lot about how games marketing has developed this gen...



Oh Hideo Kojima. Or Joakim Mogren, or whoever you're pretending to be. Oh *you*. You're so good. So bloody clever.

If you somehow avoided it, *The Phantom Pain* was a new IP revealed at the VGAs, shown off via a trailer that started with a bandaged man clambering out of a hospital bed and ended with a fiery whale exploding out of the ground. The internet cooed and dribbled in approval. It was weird but that was the point. It stood out.

Then the whispers began that *The Phantom Pain* could actually be a *Metal Gear* game when it turned out Moby Dick Studio might not actually exist. The world turned detective. What does the shape of the tail in the Moby Dick logo mean? The horse statue outside the hospital is symbolic, somehow. If you rearrange the letters here it spells Raiden! The flower petals are the same as the Big Boss battle, right? Wait! I think I've seen Volgin! And so on. Footage has been replayed, logos have been enhanced, stills have been analysed.

If you know Kojima, you'll know he's got history for this sort of stunt. *Metal Gear Solid 2*'s build-up via trailers and a high-profile demo bundled with *Zone Of The Enders* focused on Snake. No-one knew who Raiden was, let alone that he would be the main character.

That's what has made *The Phantom Pain* so interesting. Whatever it turns out to be, it's stirred up a gaming community that has been beaten into apathy by games marketing departments that defaults to the same boring, dull formula over and over again.

■ Rockstar's tendency to dripfeed media means every time any new asset is released, be it a trailer or screenshot, it's an event. Should that be the way forward?

> When games come out, they have been stripped bare by endless pushing by overeager marketing departments, stuffing every media channel they can

It goes like this. CGI announcement trailer accompanied by sparse press release that has the creative director promising to "take the gameplay to the next level" and that "we've built this from the ground up." Interviews with developers populated by "We've listened to feedback from the community" and "We're not ready to talk about that just yet" quotes. Reveal of said modes they weren't previously ready to talk about. Gameplay trailer. More interviews. Pre-order bonuses revealed. Multiplayer reveal. Multiplayer trailer. Special *Limited Collector's Edition* revealed. First batch of DLC revealed. Launch trailer on the day itself. Retweets of celebrities posing with a free copy of the game. Further DLC shown off.

By the time the game in question comes out, we've seen everything. There are no surprises left to discover. It's completely naked, stripped bare by months and months and months of endless pushing by overeager marketing departments stuffing every media channel they can.

THIS ISN'T BEING entirely fair to publishers, who throw a dizzying sum of money at games and need to ensure those games succeed in a market that's growing tougher and within a business model that's becoming top-heavy. Inevitably, the majority of marketing departments choose to play it safe and therefore, they default to the same formula to ensure success. If it works, then why take a risk?

But there are enough publishers who exist outside of that bubble of convention to show us how well the alternative approach works. Rockstar is famous for its dripfeed approach, which makes even a single screenshot for *Grand Theft Auto V* an event, fans rabidly micro-analysing every detail to see what clues they contain. Valve also operates behind closed doors and word of mouth powers its titles to success (and it helps that games like *Portal 2* are far better when you're surprised). And then there's Kojima, the puppetmaster who makes fans dance to his tune by dropping hints and viral campaigns pointing towards his latest project.

It's a tricky tightrope to walk but think about the last game you played, whether it's *Assassin's Creed III* or *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* or *Resident Evil 6*. Think about how much more you would have enjoyed it had you gone in completely fresh. If you had learnt about the scorestreaks when seeing them in action for the first time? If you had unlocked Ada Wong's campaign after completing the other three as a nice surprise? Conversely, wouldn't overexposure to *Dishonored, XCOM: Enemy Unknown* and *The Walking Dead* prior to their release have made them less thrilling when we played them?

While publishers need to fire every bullet they have for marketing campaigns, this is unlikely to change any time soon and developers like Kojima will remain the exception rather than the norm. And perhaps that's exactly how Kojima likes it. Sadly, it makes the videogames industry a less exciting place for the rest of us.

Ryan King is editor of





Ninja Gaiden 3: Returning To Its Roots

→ Producer Yosuke Hayashi and director Fumihiko Yasuda discuss the Wii U revamp

After receiving a mauling to rival even Ryu Hayabusa's best work, Team NINJA has overhauled the sequel's design, addressing many of the flaws for the upcoming Wii U port and both reinstating old and implementing new features – including a new cooperative gameplay mode with a new playable ninja, Ayane. "We reviewed as many of the reviews and comments as possible and made clear to ourselves what it is that people want from a *Ninja Gaiden* game," admits director Fumihiko Yasuda. "When developing *Ninja Gaiden 3*, we thought a bit too much about making 'a game that no one would hate.' So for *Ninja Gaiden 3: Razor's Edge*, we started with the idea of strengthening the aspects that set us apart."

One such feature is the graphic dismemberment that has become synonymous to the series, curiously omitted from *Ninja Gaiden 3*'s Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 iterations. "When looking at what makes a *Ninja Gaiden* game unique – what makes people say, 'That's a *Ninja Gaiden* game' – we found that depictions of graphic violence like dismemberment and blood spraying were necessary elements," agrees Yasuda. "Of course, there was discussion internally about these aspects, so it's not just us simply going back and putting in gore again. It's a deliberate choice we made after a lot of thought."

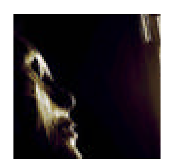
It's a reassuring step for the developer, returning to its roots and put the series back on track once again. "This was a year that made it very clear to Team NINJA what it means to be a *Ninja Gaiden* game and what fans really want from the series," says producer Yosuke Hayashi. "And we firmly believe that there is a future even beyond *Ninja Gaiden 3: Razor's Edge*. Ryu Hayabusa has been and will always be the ultimate ninja, and he will return for all the fans."

COAST TO COAST

with Gray Nicholson



Remembering a time when a games console really was just a games console



You probably got one of those messages from Microsoft celebrating ten years of Xbox Live, together with an X-faced helmet for your avatar. It stirred fond feelings, mashing together a big block of typography from little phrases like 'gnome smashing' and 'necromorph dismembering' and 'witch avoiding'.

But an attached letter from Live's VP, Marc Whitten, read like a rap sheet, pounding out in one document the ways in which our online gaming network was transformed into a big shop on the wall of our living rooms. Words like apps, destinations, services; all names for products being sold. Sports, TV, movies, music. The sprawl and dilution of Live laid out as thrilling progress.

By the time Whitten wrote, "If the last ten years is any indication of what's possible in the next ten years, just imagine the innovation yet to come," I felt a chill in my spine.

Microsoft has become reluctant to acknowledge the Xbox as a games console – embarrassed by the idea, even. Games are downplayed, buried.

The interactions I now have with my Xbox resemble awkward moments in the Eighties, when some salesmen still worked door to door, and occasionally one would make it into the house. An uncomfortable relationship would form between him and your parents. Here he was, in this personal setting, not a busy street corner where it's just a case of no thanks, and everything from his canvas bag of cleaning products or ring binder of laminated marketing materials is of no use, is not desired, is overpriced.



It wasn't much of a looker, but it sure did love games a lot more than its successor.

> "By the time Whitten wrote, 'If the last ten years is any indication of what's possible in the next ten years, just imagine the innovation yet to come,' I felt a chill in my spine"

Worse than that, actually. It's like the man said he was here to fix the gas, then came in and tore off his coveralls, revealing the sad polyester suit beneath, and started trying to sell you timeshare or garage doors. Here I invited in a games machine, and for a period was satisfied that's what I'd got. At some point, when I'd done the polite thing and gone off to put the kettle on, it had done the bloody switcharoo and become the unwelcome salesman, poking my knee with the garishly illustrated ring binder when I came to sit down.

I love games, which is what Xboxes used to be for, and so I keep this thing that every day tries to fool me. Increasingly, though, I feel it's the one reluctantly keeping me, sullenly delivering this single channel of outdated entertainment, this one narrow revenue stream I allow it to tap, while behind a layer of video a pixel thick, neon-bright tiles slip, slide and animate with the things it would rather we did together; me spending without consideration, it serving up content that businessmen can be proud to sell, not this kids' stuff. Even add-ons and episodic content can be called something other than games in the boardroom. Upsold retention revenue instances, or something.

Today, 'Games' is just one of eight tabs or channels or destinations on the dashboard (and right now, a quarter of it is an ad for an electric shaver.) On the Home screen, an apologetic little box off to one side for launching my game. Six times larger, a photo of Bruno Mars. Also: DLC, an ESPN sports portal, something from Verizon.

Humorously, about one in ten of these tiles is labelled 'advertisement'. They're all advertisements, of course: music videos for sale, episodes, horse armour. It's an internet where all links add-to-cart.

I can try to ignore Bruno Mars' hideous eyes selling a concert, but that's the state of things now. How long until, like those in-stream ads on YouTube, you're forced to watch a 30-second spot for Nationwide Insurance before *Skyrim* loads?

Gray Nicholson is a former videogames journalist who now resides in America, acknowledging his roots as he sees fit



What to expect from the next gen

With a new era of gaming on the horizon, speculation continues to run rampant regarding the innovations that Microsoft, Sony, et al will deliver over the next couple of years. With publishers desperately trying to appease all demographics, we asked the games™ readers to tell us what they want from the next generation of hardware

"To take its time. Am not in a hurry to see next gen. This gen is awesome IMO. Couldn't care about graphics, just innovate more."
@RobPelwenkhan, Twitter

"I would like it to be a games console and not a multimedia hub that tries to be all things to all people! Get back to basics: buy console, play games."
Arthur Scroggins, Facebook

"Higher resolutions, awesome liquid and material physics, games that look like the Unreal 4 tech demo and a *Red Dead* Next Gen."
@adamwilliamski, Twitter

"I guess what I want more than anything is an injection of new ideas. The majority of triple-A games of the past couple of years have essentially been reiterating what's been done before (either in terms of a sequel or a new 'safe' IP) rather than pushing the boat out in any big way. This has made me gradually start to fall out of love with games – frankly, this gen has been too long. Obviously there is invention to be found in indie games and other downloadable titles, but I'd love to see some of the big name publishers do a bit more. Ubisoft seems to have got the ball rolling with *ZombiU* and *Watch Dogs*, but I'm looking forward to seeing what others will do with the new machines."
Rotek, games™ forum

"I'm not interested in streaming, but I do see great potential in portability – allowing you to play elements of the same game on different devices, be they home console, tablet or phone. And motion control still has untapped potential to be explored. But above all else I want consistent game worlds with interesting graphical techniques and not just photorealism."
Andrew Fisher, Facebook

"I want better graphics for a start, and then an integrated home multimedia super station, including teasmade for both coffee and hot chocolate, a soda stream and a USB Hoover attachment. Maybe even a USB-powered Swiss Army attachment, but that might be pushing it."
James Angus, Facebook

"I'd love to see some cross-platform support. I've ended up buying several titles across two or more consoles just to play with friends. I'd gladly fork out a bit more to play with my PS4 friends while on my Nextbox 720."
Michael Glavin, Facebook

"A smoother shopping experience (I'm looking at you, PlayStation Store!)"
@SupaLewigi, Twitter

"I'd like a games console to remember its place in the world – for playing games. Disc-based retail games, none of this free-to-play microtransaction bollocks."
Guiness1981, games™ forum

"Fewer updates would be lovely. One can dream, right?"
@Past_the_pixels, Twitter

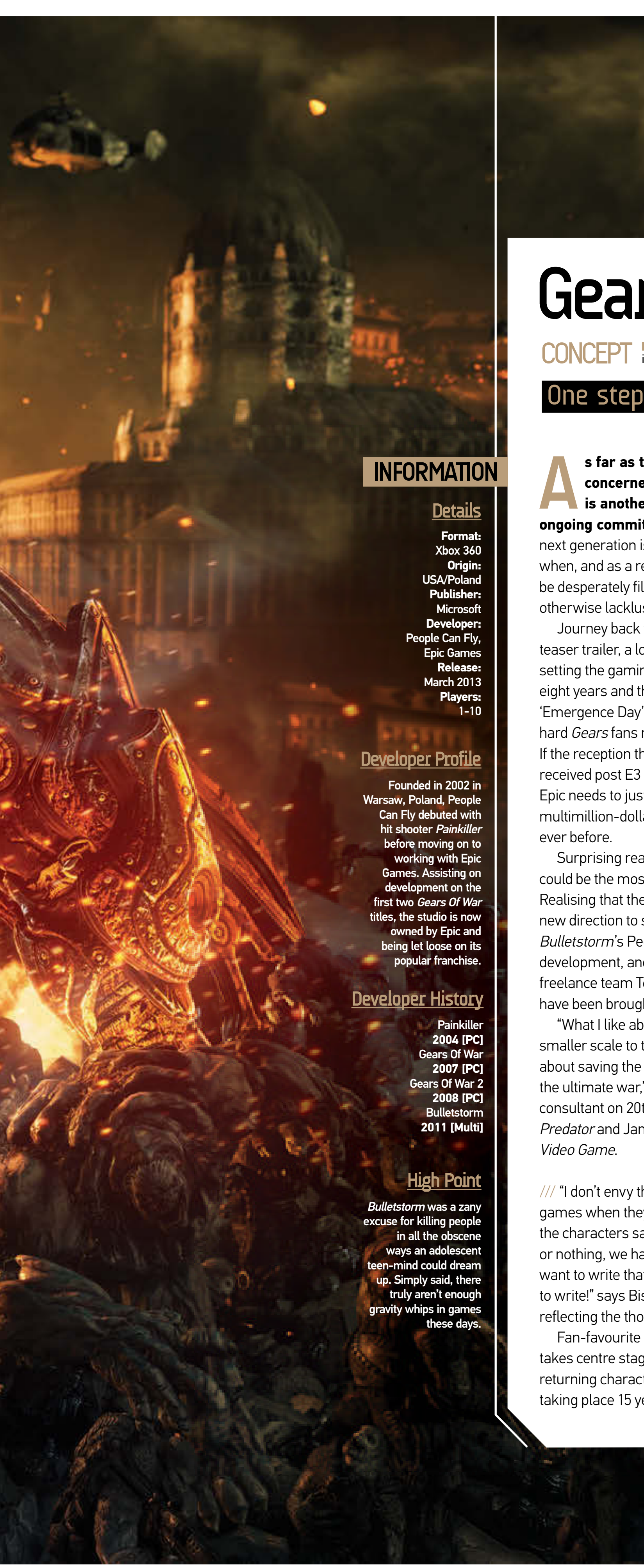
"Controllers. Please let there still be controllers."
Kevin Scully, Facebook



Gears Of War: Judgment deals with the battle of Halvo Bay and the first Emergence of the Locust. Expect the battles to be bigger, bloodier, faster and more vicious than ever before. Sera is going to get torn apart by the fury of man and machine.

"Before the rise of the Lambent, the sinking of Jacinto or the detonation of the Lightmass bomb, there was Emergence Day – when the Locust horde burst from the ground and set Sera on a path toward near annihilation"

PRESS RELEASE MICROSOFT



INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360
Origin: USA/Poland
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: People Can Fly, Epic Games
Release: March 2013
Players: 1-10

Developer Profile

Founded in 2002 in Warsaw, Poland, People Can Fly debuted with hit shooter *Painkiller* before moving on to working with Epic Games. Assisting on development on the first two *Gears Of War* titles, the studio is now owned by Epic and being let loose on its popular franchise.

Developer History

Painkiller **2004 [PC]**
Gears Of War **2007 [PC]**
Gears Of War 2 **2008 [PC]**
Bulletstorm **2011 [Multi]**

High Point

Bulletstorm was a zany excuse for killing people in all the obscene ways an adolescent teen-mind could dream up. Simply said, there truly aren't enough gravity whips in games these days.

Gears Of War: Judgment

CONCEPT ■ The trilogy may have wrapped, but Epic and People Can Fly are delving back into the *Gears* universe to tell a tale of betrayal and guns with big chainsaws.

One step closer to Emergence Day

As far as the wider industry is concerned, *Gears Of War: Judgment* is another casualty of Microsoft's ongoing commitment to the future. The next generation is coming; we just don't know when, and as a result Microsoft seems to be desperately filling the gaps on what is an otherwise lacklustre 2013 line-up.

Journey back to E3 2005 and you'll find a teaser trailer, a logo and two simple words setting the gaming world on fire. Fast-forward eight years and the slightest mention of 'Emergence Day' will have even the most die-hard *Gears* fans rolling their eyes in dismissal. If the reception that *Gears Of War: Judgment* received post E3 2012 is any indication, Epic needs to justify the continuation of its multimillion-dollar franchise now more than ever before.

Surprising really, when you consider this could be the most refreshing instalment yet. Realising that the series needed to move in a new direction to stay relevant, Epic has enlisted *Bulletstorm*'s People Can Fly to collaborate on development, and perhaps most interestingly, freelance team Tom Bissell and Rob Auten have been brought in to pen the story.

"What I like about this story is that it's on a smaller scale to the previous trilogy. It's not about saving the world. It's not about winning the ultimate war," states Auten, previously a consultant on 20th Century Fox's *Aliens Vs Predator* and James Cameron's *Avatar: The Video Game*.

/// "I don't envy the writers of the previous games when they had to write the speech for the characters saying, [hero voice] 'It's now or nothing, we have to save the world.' I don't want to write that speech; that's a hard speech to write!" says Bissell, the author of *Extra Lives*, reflecting the thoughts of his writing partner.

Fan-favourite secondary character Baird takes centre stage this time out, alongside returning character Augustus Cole, with events taking place 15 years before the first *Gears Of War*. Yes, *Judgment* is a prequel, but that doesn't mean it should be disregarded.

Going back to the earliest days of conflict on Sera, the game picks up with Baird and the members of his Kilo Squad standing trial at a COG court martial. The game is framed around this investigation, flittering between the ongoing investigation and Baird's early struggles against the Locust just 30 days after Emergence. "When we heard that *Gears Judgment* was going to be set around Baird, Cole and two new characters, as a writer that was a dream," comments Bissell, with Auten quick to assure players that their franchise is in safe hands.

"We were lucky with the two new characters because this is a different point in the *Gears* history," says Auten, "and so we were able to bring in these more disparate groups in a way that we've never seen before. They have their own form of banter.

"Our characters don't really like each other as much… they haven't known each other at all. [They] have been recently enlisted, put into a fire team and told 'go get the bad guys'."

Getting those bad guys looks like it's going to be more fun and fluid than ever before, as People Can Fly takes the reins. From what **games™** has seen so far, the pace has been ramped up to reflect the desperation of those early conflicts.

The game feels faster and tighter than ever before. People Can Fly is taking the tried and tested formula and bending it. It still looks and feels like classic *Gears Of War*, it's just *different*.

Debris now appears taller than waist height. The duck-and-cover gameplay that typified the series has been given a shot of variety. Battles are full of motion, with Baird forced to keep on his feet for survival. Enemy AI seems to have improved greatly, with Locust determined to root you out of cover if you're sitting comfortably.

The aforementioned pace of *Judgment* marks the most welcome change. Fights are frantic, desperate struggles for survival. It feels

like the battlefield is constantly evolving, a trait we are most used to seeing in *Halo* than the shady world of *Gears*.

The controls have been reworked to allow grenades to be thrown on the fly without the turn-wheel menu acting as a barrier to explosive glory. Baird can now carry a maximum of two 'real' weapons, with the pistol most likely finding itself on the floor instead of the holster. Ingeniously, these slight changes to control and loadouts open new ways to tackle situations and manage firefights. Just as well, as *Judgment* throws ever-evolving sets of enemies into the fray depending on your score as the level unfolds.

The ratings system is a first for the campaign, and a welcome addition at that. Score is earned by dishing out headshots, executions, takedowns and other similar displays of human superiority. Playing with deadly finesse will not only increase the variety of combat, but will also go some way to helping you earn in-game content such as new weapons, player skins and other hidden extras.

If you're worried that all the enhancements have been done under the hood, then you will be happy to hear that Baird does have some shiny new toys to play with. A bouncing-bomb iteration of the Boomshot makes an appearance, as does a new sniper-rifle that favours manoeuvrability over head-exploding power.

Work is being done to build on the foundations of *Gears Of War 3*'s sublime multiplayer as well. Two new gameplay modes will be showing up: classic Free-For-All and OverRun. OverRun sees two teams battle for supremacy over a map, in an interesting new twist on traditional attack and defend game types. As the Locust make their way from one end of map to the other, they need to take three separate capture points to open up the next set, attempting to push the COG further and further back. Things get hectic when the game opens up various types of support roles to turn the tide of battle for the COG, while Locust players have the option of upgrading to bigger, scarier monsters to dominate.

/// For us, it's the single-player where *Gears* excels, and *Gears Of War* has always been about big monsters, big guns and a fight for survival. Understandably there is some worry that *Judgment*'s smaller scale could sterilise the experience. The writers are confident that with the gameplay changes People Can Fly has implemented, a more intimate story can work in the context of the *Gears* universe.

"When you're a player playing a good game with awesome gameplay, it doesn't matter whether the stakes are saving the world or saving your favourite bicycle. If the game is fun to play, it means just as much to you as a player if you save the bicycle or world," Bissell says. "If the characters are fun to hang out with, it doesn't matter what's at stake. What's at stake is just what the game feels like when you're playing it. What I love about this particular story is that it avoids the 'save the world' problem and I think it makes for a really much more, weirdly, intimate kind of story."

/// The writers seem to have it all in hand, though, with their love of the franchise guiding it through its exciting transition. "When Tom and I met and said that we should work together, there were a couple of games that we made friends over through our love of. *Gears* was one… We knew the story of the characters, we'd done a lot of research. I wouldn't say we knew it as well [as Epic] but we were pretty close as fans," enthuses Auten,

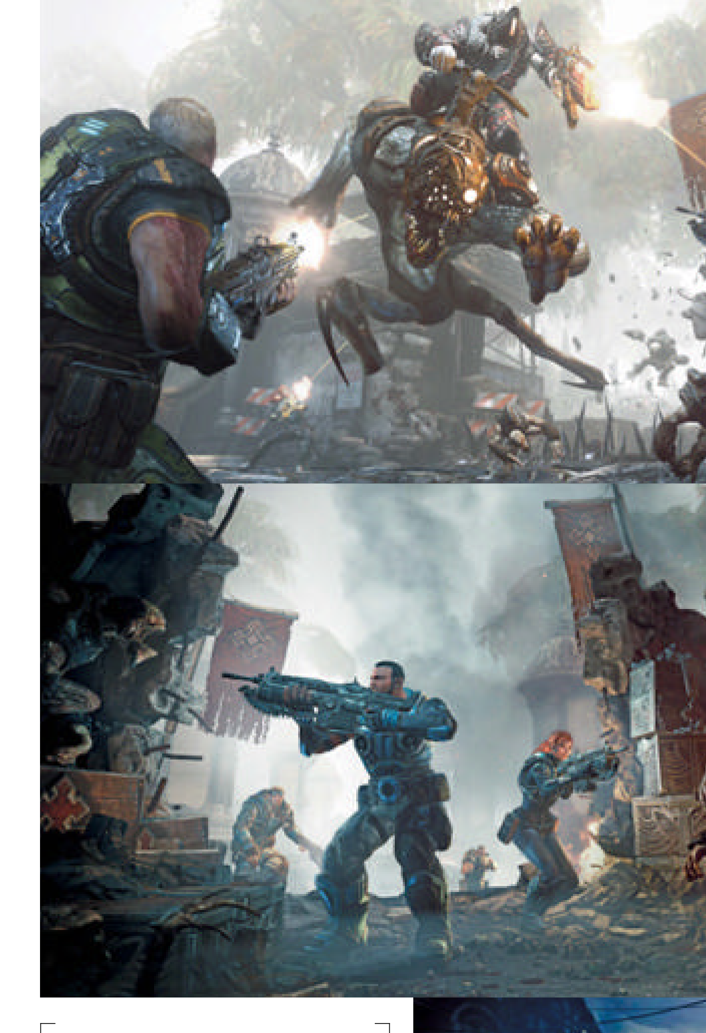
> "Takes you back to the aftermath of Emergence Day —the defining event of the 'GOW' universe"
>
> PRESS RELEASE MICROSOFT

with Bissell quipping back, "Yeah, I played the shit out of the other *Gears* games…"

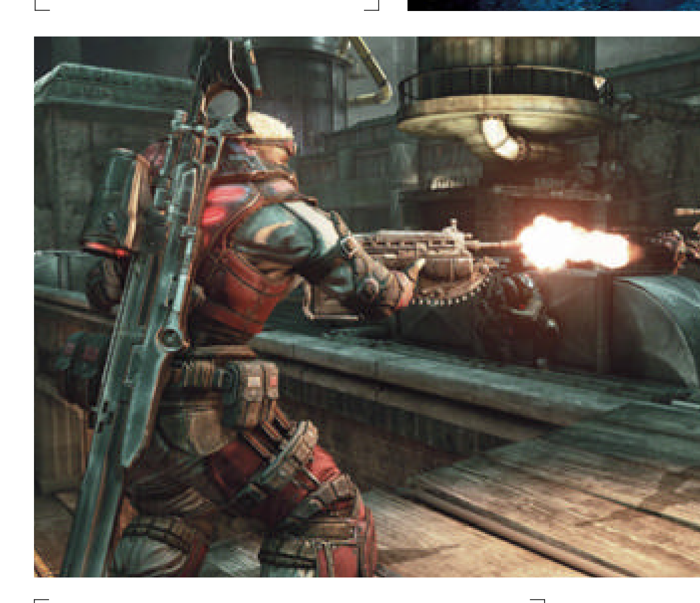
Having two writers so dedicated to the franchise is welcome news; some fans were highly critical of the plot from *Gears Of War 3*, highlighting its breezy characterisations, lagged pacing and ropey handling of twists. But the writing duo are again quick to assure players that they are dedicated to delivering an experience that's true to what has come before it.

"One thing that we're pretty adamant about is that this is a savage, horrifying game about chopping monsters in half. Honour that. Honour the savagery, honour the brutality and create interesting people to bounce up against it," says Bissell confidently.

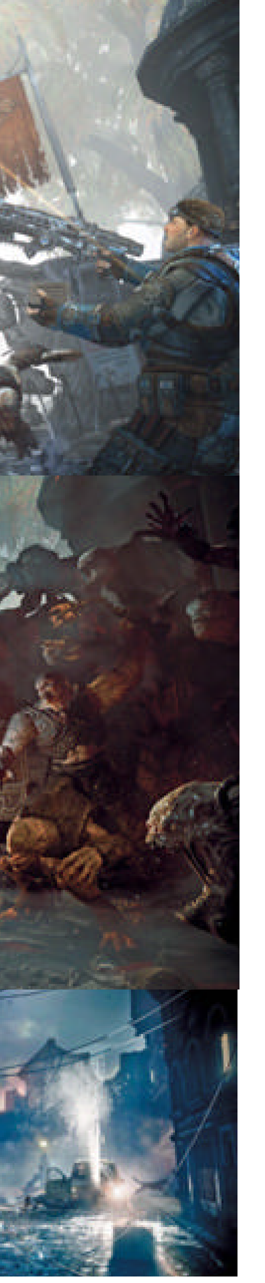
Despite all odds, *Gears Of War: Judgment* is slowly overcoming the, well, unjustified judgment from jaded gamers. Microsoft might be keeping its Q1 line-up breezy, but that doesn't mean that the titles arriving aren't of serious quality. The *Gears* trilogy might be finished, Marcus Fenix and his Dom bromance is off the table, but that's no reason to not get excited – People Can Fly, along with Epic, is forging something new with a tired franchise. You might just be surprised by the results.



Above: Baird heads up Kilo squad, alongside Cole, Sofia Hendrick and Garron Paduk, tasked with taking on the Locust following the first Emergence. Right: Epic and People Can Fly have strived to make this the best-looking *Gears Of War* titles yet; the epic franchise continues to look better and better. Below: Multiplayer has always been a huge part of *Gears Of War*, and this time around Epic is introducing Free-For-All to the familiar team-based playlists. Nothing like a bit of friend-on-friend carnage.

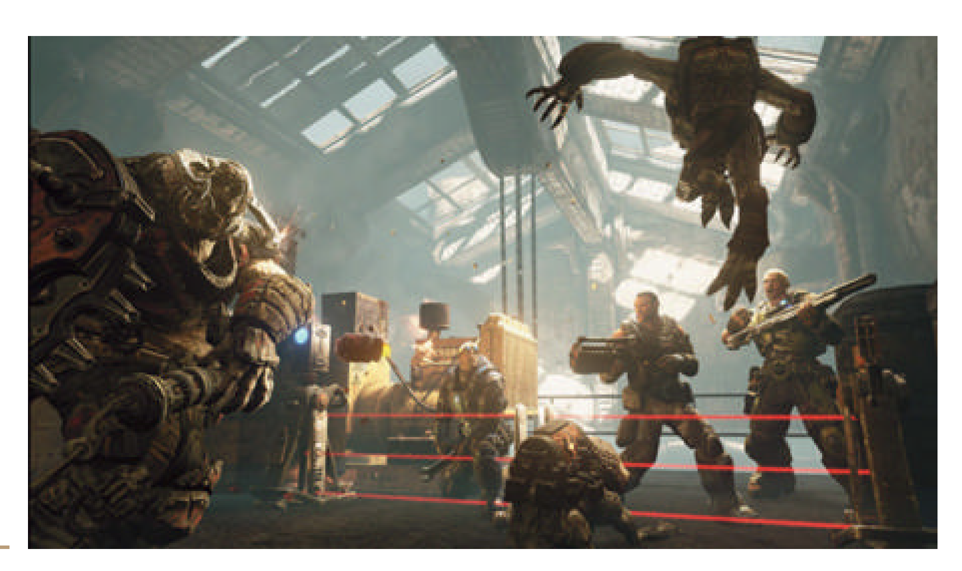


Above: People Can Fly seems to have brought some vibrancy to characters we are accustomed to seeing in 50 shades of grey and brown.



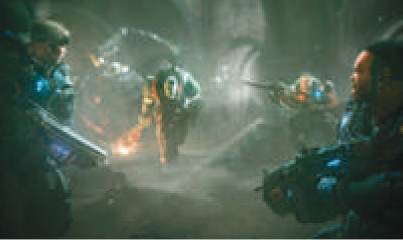
MEET THE TEAM

MARCUS AND Dom are relegated to the history books – they became a fading memory as soon as the credits rolled on *Gears Of War 3*, so it was up to Epic to redefine the focus of the series. An online poll determined Baird, surprisingly, as the fan-favourite character to continue the series. Augustus 'The-Cole-Train' Cole also returns, with the Kilo Squad rounded out by two brand new members, Sofia Hendrick and Garron Paduk. The new writing duo decided to include two new members, as opposed to returning more old characters, in an attempt to open up new storytelling avenues. Not a bad thing after the mundanity of *Gears 3*.





Above: OverRun is an exciting addition to the tried and tested *Gears* multiplayer formula. A new challenge awaits those willing to leave the comfort of Team Deathmatch. Left: People Can Fly doesn't have a great deal of experience with multiplayer, but Epic is still on hand to guide the studio towards the promised land of Xbox Live glory. Below: The Locust have an array of new weapons, but it's their hunger for war following Emergence that's terrifying.

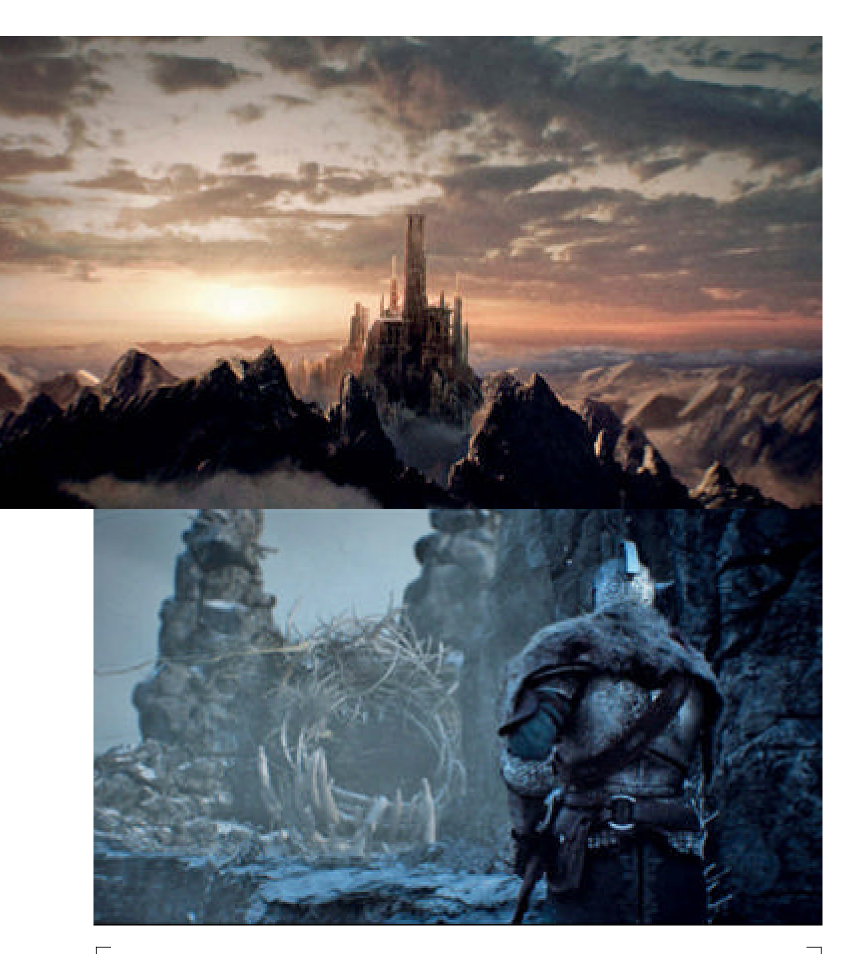






PURELY CINEMATIC

THE USE of cinematics in videogames is a hotly debated topic. Used correctly, they can create an experience that rivals any blockbuster Hollywood movie. Used in excess, however, and they can become overbearing, ruining the pacing and intention of a scene. This is an eventuality Rob Auten was keen to avoid. "We can be really proud of the fact that we've made such a cinematic game that doesn't rely on cinema to the same extent that so many cinematic games have previously. It still feels like a *Gears* game. Cut-scenes aren't bad, they aren't the enemy, [but] I think *Gears 3* had 90 minutes of cut-scenes. That's too many." It remains to be seen if the new writing team have succeeded, but we sure hope they have.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: From Software
Release: 2013
Players: 1/TBC

Developer Profile

From Software has a patchy track record, producing only a few praiseworthy gems nestled uncomfortably in the multitude of mediocrity. Despite this, the robot-whacking *Armored Core* series has its niche and the *Dark Souls/Demon's Souls* franchise was rated highly.

Developer History

Dark Souls **2011 [Multi]**
Demon's Souls **2009 [PlayStation 3]**
Armored Core 4 **2007 [Multi]**
Lost Kingdoms **2002 [GameCube]**

High Point

While this contradicts previous scores, *Dark Souls* is by far the best of the studio's output. Challenging, dense and rewarding in unparalleled measures.

Dark Souls II

CONCEPT ■ A Hidetaka Miyazaki-less sequel to last year's gloomy sleeper hit.

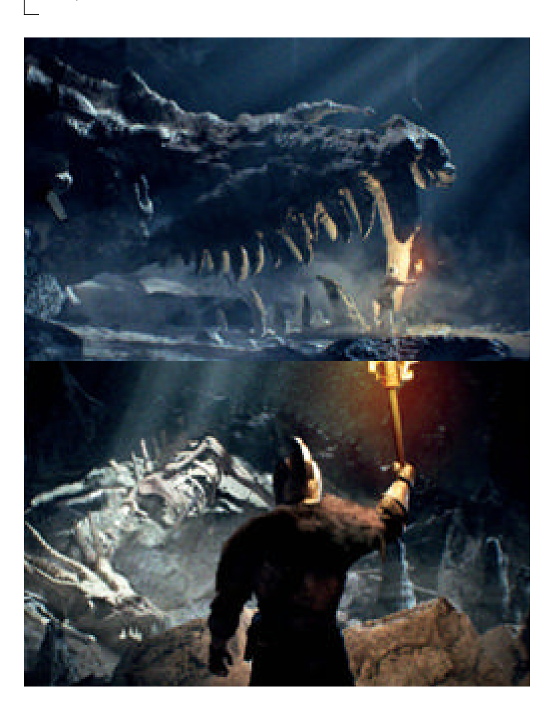
Praise the sun!

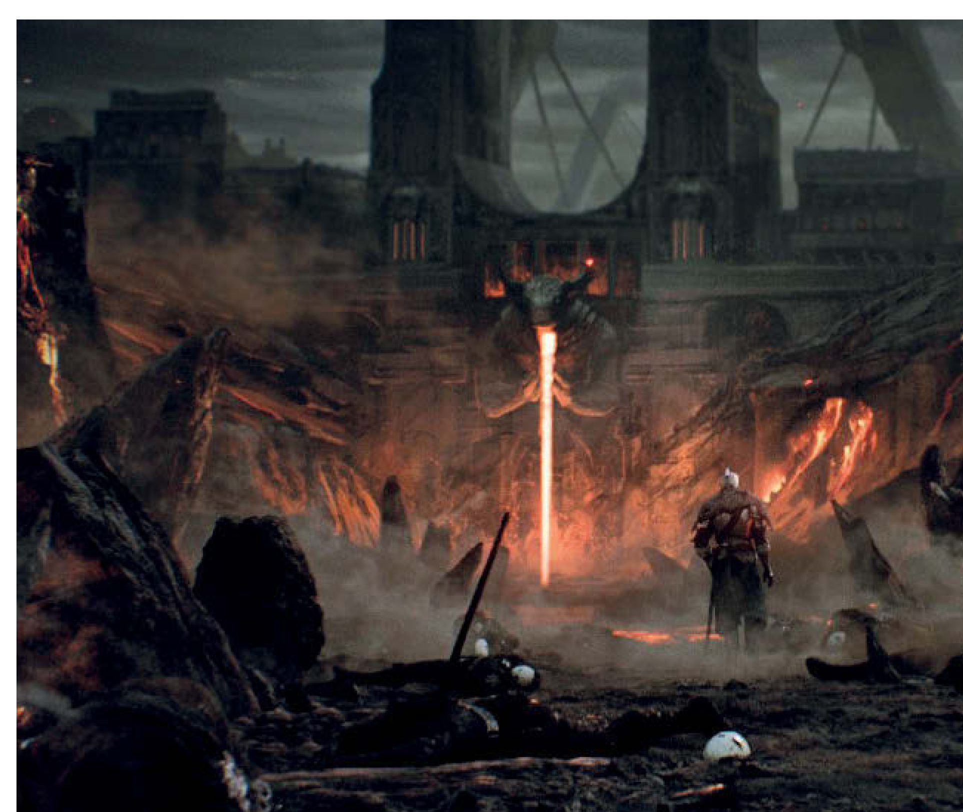
In the hands of the right developer, fear is a weapon deadlier than a crystal halberd. That's certainly how the *Souls* series has garnered the enviable reputation as one of the most hardened gaming experiences of recent years, utilising a potent blend of exquisitely fine-tuned mechanics and a suffocating bleak milieu that ingrains a state of pure hopelessness in players.

But, as it turns out, people like to win at videogames. The crushingly cruel difficulty and rather opaque systems present in *Dark Souls* are built for those prepared to fully immerse themselves in the experience, which is why the series – or, more to the point, *Dark Souls* – remained on the fringes of commercial success despite such widespread acclaim.

This is why that the announcement of the sequel has been met with guarded enthusiasm, the community agitated by the possibility of a simplification to the series' core tenets transferred over into the sequel. "We have taken these necessary steps with *Dark Souls II* in order to evolve the overall experience of the *Dark Souls* series," says From Software's Tomohiro Shibuya, one of the two directors – alongside Yui Tanimura – who have inherited creative control on *Dark Souls II* from series creator Hidetaka Miyazaki. But while capricious online

■ Above: While no release date is given, expect *Dark Souls II* to arrive at the end of 2013 – leaving us just enough time to polish off *Dark Souls*' New Game Plus. Below: The world in *Dark Souls* didn't make a lick of sense, but then we liked it like that.





commentators are quick to express instant disapproval to change, inviting accessibility into the *Dark Souls* universe doesn't necessarily have to come at the expense of challenge.

/// Even the most seasoned undead would struggle to effectively communicate the intricacies of *Dark Souls*' covenants or advanced crafting. Breaking down such arguably purposeless complication would be an obvious benefit and Shibuya agrees that the next instalment will feel quite different with compromising its core values. "This new chapter in the *Dark Souls* saga presents opportunities for us to drive innovation in gameplay design, develop an entirely new story, and expand the scope of the world in which the player interacts with the game," he says. "The entire development team is striving to make *Dark Souls II* an experience that is fresh while not forsaking its roots in presenting players with challenging gameplay. Our goal is to surprise and delight our fans with new experiences and plot twists while enticing new players to join our dark journey."

Where will that journey take us? The debut trailer at last month's VGA suggests a twist to the presentation. Firstly, the choral soundtrack lacks the desolate melancholy of previous scores; the focal point clearly on a hero, rather than the tone, gameplay or environment. The signs are pointing towards a game with a more prominent character, but also a story that will delve further back into the lore of the series.

We're certainly entertaining the theory that *Dark Souls II* might in fact be a prequel. The blood boiling on the soil towards the start of the trailer is reminiscent of Kiln of the First Flame – the endgame location of *Dark Souls* – prior to its desolation. There's also the triple-eyed dragon that swoops down to terrorise the trailer's hero, who bears a striking resemblance to Kalameet. The list of signifiers delicately placed throughout the trailer goes on and on, convincing us that we could be looking at an origin story: the persecuted undead making the pilgrimage to Lordran – the setting of *Dark Souls* – during the age of fire.

That certainly gives co-directors Tomohiro Shibuya and Yui Tanimura creative room to wiggle, establishing their own style without betraying the world that Miyazaki so finely established in the last entry. While talk of a broader reach is likely to leave fans concerned all the way up until From Software releases the game towards the end of 2013 and we find out how much has changed, the more pertinent qualm is whether From Software itself – a developer who is best described as inconsistent and more truthfully described as *really* mediocre – can replicate the success of what is by far one of the finest RPGs in years. Now that's a fearful thought.

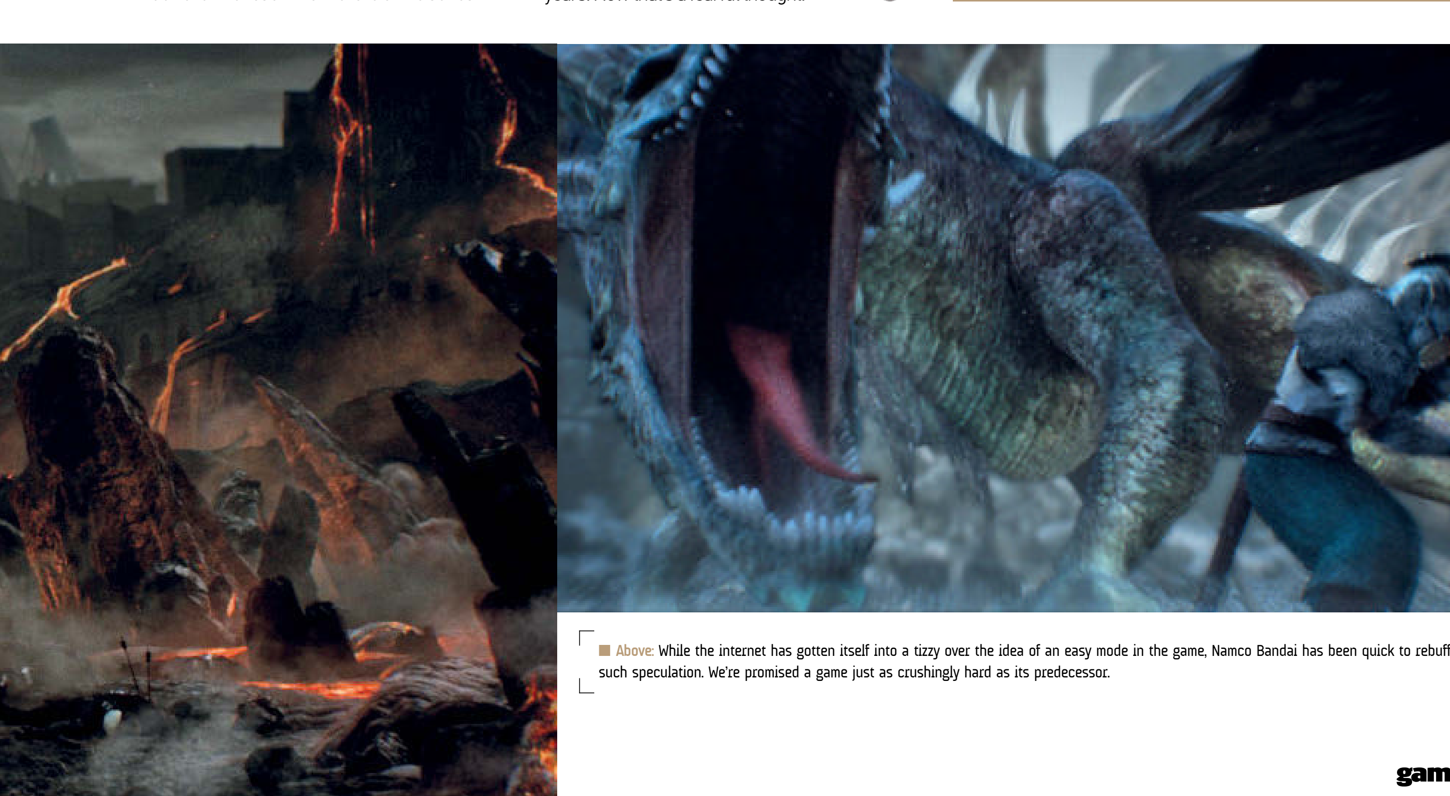
> "Dark Souls II will give every player that steps up to take the challenge a feeling of empowerment"
> **OLIVIER COMTE, NAMCO BANDAI**

■ **Below** *Dark Souls* shifted 1.2 million copies in the US and Europe. Namco Bandai will be hoping the more accessible sequel will secure a bigger bank.



ARTORIAS OF THE ABYSS

THE FIRST *Dark Souls* DLC that dropped back in October, *Artorias Of The Abyss* might not be ladled with hunts of clues for the setting of the sequel, but this ten-hour chunk of Lordran is the most fiendish that the series has offered to date. Large-scale boss battles consume much of the running time, featuring a scorpion-tailed flying lion and the fire-breathing dragon Kalameet – two bosses guaranteed to raise tempers and significantly drain time. While it doesn't reveal anything that could suggest the direction of the sequel, it's a clear demonstration that From Software still has an unwavering commitment to challenging players in a manner that rewards as much as it infuriates.



■ **Above:** While the internet has gotten itself into a tizzy over the idea of an easy mode in the game, Namco Bandai has been quick to rebuff such speculation. We're promised a game just as crushingly hard as its predecessor.



Above: Moody says there wasn't a temptation to wait until the next generation to release *GRID 2*. "Understanding how to get the best out of any console takes time, so using all of the technology, skills and knowledge built over a number of games means we can focus on creating the definitive racing experience of its generation."

GRID 2

CONCEPT ■ Sequel to *Race Driver: GRID* is once again primed to innovate the racing sim.

Executive producer Clive Moody discusses getting the franchise back on track

It's becoming increasingly rare in an industry fuelled by annual sequel instalments that a developer is afforded the luxury of time when approaching the follow-up to a successful franchise kick-starter. That's certainly the case with Codemasters' *GRID 2*, a sequel some four years in the making – and looking all the better for it. Talking with **gamesTM**, executive producer Clive Moody discusses the racer's long gestation, competitors and innovation.

You've discussed previously that the long development time has enabled the studio to better realise its vision for the sequel. What advancements have you made that wouldn't be possible a few years ago?

There's a maturity to our technology that you only get through working on the genre over a number of game iterations. The in-game lighting is a great example of this and utilises a completely new pipeline in *GRID 2*. Environments feel more real than ever and the cars within it much more integrated into the overall scene. Add onto this the ability to control the lighting and grading like a movie director and you start to understand how we are able to evoke real drama and emotion, heightening the intense racing action on the track and immersing the player into the world of a racing superstar.

There is obviously a downside to releasing a sequel so many years after the original. Have any of the rival franchises that have emerged in the interim changed your approach to *GRID 2* at all?

If anything, seeing what other racing games have been doing has strengthened our belief that *GRID 2* offers gamers something that they are unable to get from any other game. *GRID 2* puts the race at the heart of the experience, capturing all of the drama, rivalries and emotional highs and lows across a wide variety of motorsport, including street-, road- and track-based racing. Then mix in new levels of gamer immersion through cinematic presentation, TrueFeel handling which combines accessibility with genuine depth, bespoke careers for both online and offline, and real-world settings that evolve to reflect your racing successes. It all adds up to a truly unique experience.

During level design, what is the key to successfully balancing accuracy and gameplay when representing real-world locations?

A huge amount of effort is invested into the design and playtesting our locations – a process that takes many months, including both level designers and artists visiting locations for thorough research. We like to keep city layout and road networks as accurate as possible, but there are always occasions where elements may not work when set up for racing. Whilst we have tools that let us simulate cars driving around tracks, much of the balancing comes through the skills of our level design team and constant iterative review. Road width, corner shape through the use of intelligent barrier placement, street length, camber, building placement and track visibility are just some of the aspects which level design can adjust, always trying to ensure the original character of the location is not compromised.

The rewind system was an innovative genre-changing

> "There's a maturity to our technology that you only get through working on the genre over a number of game iterations"
>
> CLIVE MOODY, CODEMASTERS

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: UK
Publisher: Codemasters
Developer: In-house
Release: Early 2013
Players: 1-TBC

Developer Profile

Codemasters' studio HQ in Warwickshire is the development hub for renowned racers such as *Micro Machines*, *Colin McRae Rally/DiRT* and *F1*. But the studio has embarked on riskier ventures such as *Bodycount*, *Clive Barker's Jericho* and *Overlord*.

Developer History

F1 Race Stars **2012 [Multi]**
Race Driver: GRID **2008 [Multi]**
Crystal Kingdom Dizzy **1992 [Multi]**
Micro Machines **1991 [Multi]**

High Point

While more technically impressive racers have appeared from the developer over the years, rarely have they matched the simplistic thrills of *Micro Machines*.



The original *Race Driver: GRID* introduced the rewind mechanic that has become popular across a multitude of highly regarded racing sims in the years since.

mechanic in the last *GRID*. What is *GRID 2* bringing to both the franchise and genre that is equally unique?

The LiveRoutes system is a huge innovation for *GRID 2*. We wanted to introduce elements to the gameplay that gave some of the unpredictability you get from open-world racers without the downside that the pack of cars gets split up as they choose to take different routes. If the player chooses city-based events that use LiveRoutes, alternate sections of track seamlessly stream in whilst you race. LiveRoutes take advantage of the multiple street junction points by randomly selecting the direction the track will take; be it left, right or straight on. Barriers, race-day items and the spectating crowd are all dynamically placed to reflect the corner direction. The challenge to the player now comes from being able to read the road and adapting to suit the ever-changing challenge.

How will RaceNet evolve in the sequel?

Creating our online RaceNet service has always been seen as a long-term strategy and right now is still considered to be in beta. RaceNet 1.0 launches with *GRID 2* and will add significantly more depth to the integration between web and game, and also continue to grow beyond its release. Deep career and stats integration will enable players to plan their online and offline careers whilst away from the game, maximising their time racing and competing when at their console.

GRID FREE-TO-PLAY?

AS FREE-TO-PLAY becomes increasingly prevalent, prominent franchises have been quick to adopt the emerging business model. Codemasters' *F1* series is one such brand, so we put it to Clive Moody whether *GRID* could also possibly expand into this profitable new arena. "Free-to-play is a big area of conversation at the moment throughout the industry and hence naturally something which has been discussed in the context of *GRID*," he reveals. "The investment needed to create AAA console titles like *GRID 2* is significant, so the challenge really is on how to create monetisation streams that ensure the level of quality and experience can be maintained. It's certainly not a challenge which Codemasters will ignore, with opportunities being explored for future titles."

Codemasters decided to remove the in-car view because research showed that only 5% of players actually utilised the viewpoint.



Above: Tess is a ruthless black market smuggler, and she doesn't seem best pleased when her partner Joel takes custody of Ellie. Below: Combat is bloody and brutal; Naughty Dog is making it so visceral you'll *want* to use it as a last resort.



The Last Of Us

CONCEPT ■ Naughty Dog has found great success over the years with the likes of *Crash Bandicoot* and the *Uncharted* series', but now it's turning its attention to yet another new IP.

Naughty Dog drops archaeology and learns some survival tactics

It's been little over a year since *The Last Of Us* was first announced, and the game is still a mystery to us. Developer Naughty Dog can do no wrong in the eyes of most PlayStation gamers, and after the success of the *Uncharted* series, it has earned that respite.

The Last Of Us is Naughty Dog attempting to once again move out of its comfort zone, to push genre expectation, as it has done so many times before. A coming together of action-adventure with a smattering of survival horror, no gamer can make the assertion that Sony is playing it safe with its exclusives in 2013; the company is letting Naughty Dog run wild with its vision.

Set two decades after a fungal infection wipes out much of the population, survivors are either locked in camps, kept under heavy marshal law by the US military, or left to fend for themselves in the wild. The narrative focus falls on the weary shoulders of Joel, a black market scavenger who is entrusted by a friend to get Ellie, a 14-year-old girl, out into the world and away from the military. Its here where the various gameplay styles come into play.

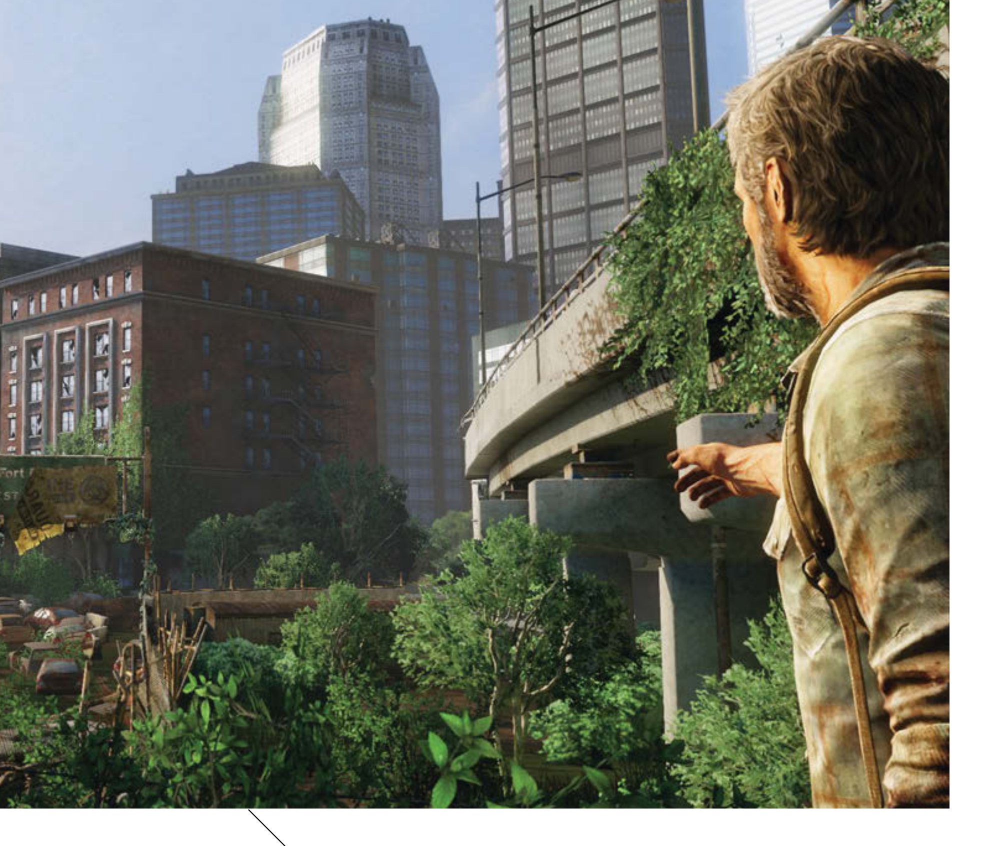
What we've seen of Joel in motion so far has him channelling a slower, more deliberate, Nathan Drake aura. Played from a third-person perspective, emphasis is placed on working with your AI partner to find safe passage across dangerous environments and scavenge any items to help you survive along the way. Of course the wild is full of dangers. Scavengers stalk the ruins, desperate to survive, and the infected are out there, hiding in the comfort of darkness.

/// The survival horror elements have been underplayed thus far, but they shouldn't be forgotten. The footage available shows incredibly visceral combat, with melee weapons being favoured over guns due to scarce ammo and the risk of drawing more attention than necessary. Remember, you have a 14-year-old girl to look out for as well. Essential items can also be combined to create more effective tools for murder, though this may hinder your chances at survival later down the line. In an interesting twist, incredible acts of violence visibly affect your AI compatriot, though this doesn't mean you need to pander to Ellie.

> "At its core, The Last of Us is about the bond that forms between Joel and Ellie – it is the story of love, loyalty, and redemption"
> PRESS RELEASE, SONY

NEW LEASE OF LIFE FOR AI

NAUGHTY DOG is putting a lot of time into making Ellie work independently of your actions. She is the pulse of the narrative, with the developer eager to redirect any interest in the zombie-like infected that litter the wild back to the attention of their star AI. She scavenges for items, works to scale inaccessible areas and, in what is probably the most heart-wrenching reveal of the preview campaign, isn't afraid to get her hands bloody. Whatever the motivation for such acts of brutality, it looks like Ellie will have to forgo a traditional childhood in favour of a last ditch effort to survive.





INFORMATION

Details

Format:
Playstation 3
Origin:
US
Publisher:
Sony
Developer:
Naughty Dog
Release:
May 7 2013
Players:
1 (multiplayer TBA)

Developer Profile

Think of the great developers of recent years, and Naughty Dog is topping the list. The father of modern platform games, it has pioneered the *Crash Bandicoot, Jak And Daxter* and recently, the *Uncharted* series, to much critical and commercial success since they were founded back in 1989.

Developer History

Crash Bandicoot
1996 [PSone]

Jak And Daxter
2001 [PSone]

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune
2007 [PS3]

Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception
2011 [PS3]

High Point

We're looking forward to AI that works. Simple as that. If the assistance from Ellie is actually useful, we'll be ecstatic.

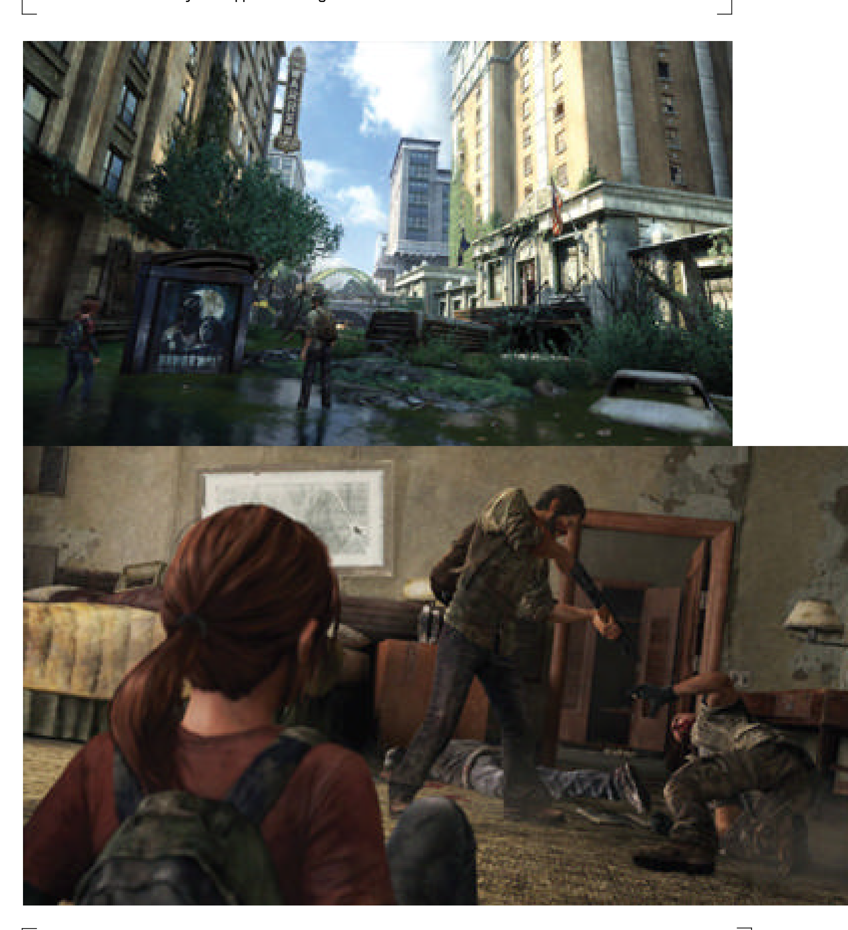
Naughty Dog has made big strides to make Ellie a central character to not just the story, but the gameplay as well. She will often aid you in combat or distract enemies if you become overwhelmed. The team is assuring players that the game won't turn into a lengthy, overbearing escort mission – instead, Ellie will think and act on her own accord – and we have no reason to doubt them.

At the heart of *The Last Of Us* is story about love, a father-daughter relationship overcoming hardships. If Naughty Dog's latest cinematic trailer showed us anything, it's that there will be plenty of hardships ahead. While it showed little in the way of new footage, it did introduce us to Joel's partner, Tess. Played by *24*'s Annie Wersching, the trailer gives us a brief glimpse into how Ellie is going to come between their relationship, as well as a glance towards other locations and characters. Naughty Dog are still keeping tight lipped on much of the cast, but one things fairly certain, there's going to be plenty of broken hearts as this story unfolds.

Things are coming together nicely for Naughty Dog. *The Last Of Us* looks beautiful, and really appears to be squeezing the last of the power out of the PlayStation 3's hardware. The addition of *BioShock Infinite*'s art director Nate Wells to the team cannot hurt either.

Stepping out of the shadow of *Uncharted* will certainly be tough for the developer, now synonymous with tomb raiding and relocating artefacts to museums. They've done it before, and we have little doubt they will be able to do it again, though we need to see more footage to be completely reassured, but *The Last Of Us* is undoubtedly one of the brightest new IPs in a time when a lot of the industry seems to be simply treading water as they wait for a new console generation.

Above: When situations get dire, Ellie can assist in combat, not that she likes getting her hands bloody. Below: *The Last Of Us* is gorgeous, not surprising considering the pedigree of *Uncharted 3*, but it still makes us wish away the supposed 'next-generation'.



Above: Joel might have a little girl in his care, but that doesn't mean he won't do anything to survive. Bullets will rip through flesh and Ellie will be noticeably taken aback, but in this world she doesn't get a chance to indulge in innocence.

The War Z

CONCEPT ■ Live the apocalypse, and survive the zombie outbreak in this ambitious 'Survival-Horror MMO'.

Which poses the greater threat? The living or the dead?… The War Z confidently claims it's the living

With apocalypse simulators becoming more attractive with every passing month, *The War Z* is the latest survival horror MMO to move into beta and, if the games™ playtest is any indication, yet another step towards realising a fully persistent zombie movie that never ends.

The War Z is a massively multiplayer online game that encourages players to live out the end of the world however they see fit. Dropping you into the expansive map of Colorado with a flashlight and just about enough food and water to survive the day, from there you are left completely to your own devices.

Unlike other apocalypse simulators, *The War Z* is built from the ground up to accommodate the experience – and even in this early build, that shines through. The inventory is easy to navigate, the map only a button press away and most importantly, equipping and customising weapons is easy to do on the fly. Built on the engine of an army simulator this is not, and as such *The War Z* lends itself to a different type of experience than its prime competitor, *Day Z*. Veterans of *Battlefield 3* will likely feel at home with the feel of the weapons, though extended use of guns is never advised. Gunshots attract attention, as signified by a noise indicator in the top right of the UI, and as with any end-of-the-world scenario, ammo is a sparse and valuable commodity.

Combat is savage, with melee always dangling the opportunity for a silent kill against the risk of being totally overwhelmed. Items and weapons are found through exploration around the map, though the impatient (and rich) can always look at upgrading their gear through the in-game store.

/// You can go at it alone, foraging for items and weapons as you come across buildings and crash-sites, or you can try to form uneasy alliances with other players and take on the undead together. Just don't complain when it inevitably turns sour.

The War Z has potential, but its biggest issue lies with the very player base it's trying so desperately to serve. Hammerpoint has created a world where players can choose to be the survivor that they want to be. The system leans on players having any degree of moral compass; sadly, if you see anything moving with more than a casual shuffle, expect a gunshot or baseball bat to the head to follow shortly thereafter.

Death brings despair, as you're not only locked out from respawning for a set time, but your entire inventory is left to the vultures. It's an incredibly unforgiving system that is supposed to increase realism. It may be that as the game reaches retail, gamers will accustom to the play style. As it stands, *The War Z* is tough but incredibly infectious.

It's channelling more of an *Eve Online* vibe than say, *World Of Warcraft*, with Hammerpoint presenting the world without any defined rules, encouraging players to take the servers into their own hands. Quests are player created, items can be traded and sold between survivors (at risk), and the general chat can either be a signal for exploration or the final toll for a lost soul who's inveterately alerted all bandits in the local area.

> "War Z is an open-world zombie game; in this post-apocalyptic world you'll discover more than you ever imagined"
>
> PRESS RELEASE HAMMERPOINT INTERACTIVE

Hammerpoint is clearly hoping that the risk of playing will compel, not alienate players. *The War Z* is bound to be a title that finds longevity through word-of-mouth, with tales of overcoming zombie adversity and mass-griefing likely to be what draws players in.

As long as development stays on track, there is no reason *The War Z* can't build a healthy player-base before *Day Z* hits with mass hysteria. They are certainly different enough to inspire varying experiences, but – as with all games that lean solely on people to define an experience – whether you catch someone on their good day or a bad day with a shotgun is likely to inform your game session more than anything else.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Arktos Entertainment Group
Developer: Hammerpoint Interactive
Release: 2013
Players: MMO

Developer Profile

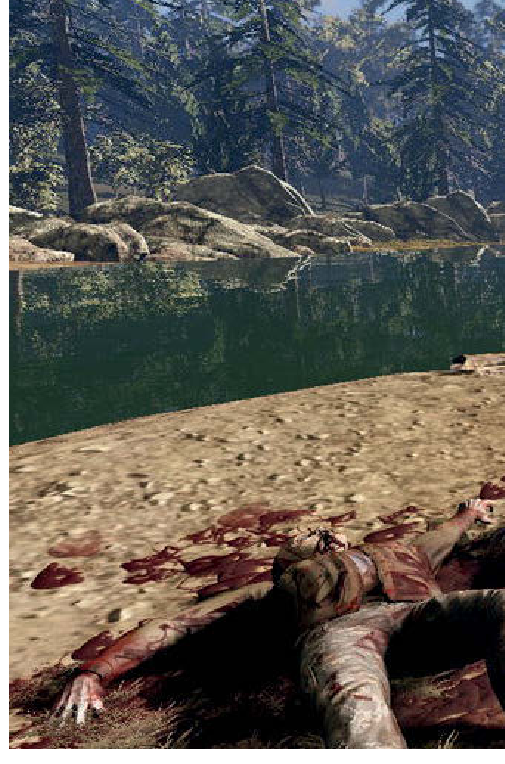
Hammerpoint Interactive is a new studio, formed in 2011, diving straight into work on *The War Z*. It's made up of developers from all corners of the industry, with faces from the likes of Treyach and Harmonix pitching in to create this zombie-infested MMO.

Zombie History Highlights

Zombies Ate My Neighbors **SNES [1994]**
Resident Evil **PSone [1996]**
Left For Dead **PC/Xbox360[2008]**
The Walking Dead **Multi [2012]**

High Point

While the zombie phenomenon certainly didn't start in 1996, *Resident Evil* has perhaps given us more scares and thrills than any other form of media starring the shambling dead.





■ Above: Players can form uneasy alliances and forge strongholds to take on the undead. Then again, a member of your group could just turn rogue and rob the entire outfit; you never know who to trust.



Above: Even in beta *The War Z* looks gorgeous. There are often large stretches where there's not a bandit nor zombie in sight. Thankfully the world is littered with camps and helicopter crash sites to explore and loot. Below: Guns handle well, but ammo is incredibly scarce. Most scraps start and finish in melee range, and you don't want to be on the receiving end of a nail-laden baseball bat.

BUILDING THE FUTURE

HAMMERPOINT IS committed to building *The War Z* into the ultimate zombie survival game. With so much emphasis placed on building alliances and bandit squads, naturally the studio is implementing ways of bringing everyone closer together. Interestingly, strongholds are being introduced where groups can board up and hole in a safe location, with a pass-code guarding the entrance. Shared inventory is also being introduced, with groups being able to easily share resources, though this does open up the possibility for player-scams and bandit robbery.

Fights get frantic pretty quickly. If you decide to run off alone, don't be surprised if you feel the fury of three or four gods. It's easy to get overwhelmed.

WEAPONS OF THE GODS

GOD OF WAR gives you the ability to upgrade and purchase equipment in the multiplayer. Not only does it go a long way to making your hero look like an absolute badass, but it also increases stats like defence, power, and health. You can get the upgrades through racking up kills, looting chests and completing in-game challenges. This does of course eventually put you at an advantage over new players, so hopefully Sony Santa Monica will balance the upgrade system, or at the very least give you the option of more unlockable gear right from the get-go – depending on what God you pledged allegiance to at the start of the multiplayer.

Above: We might be getting a chance to see the more human side to Kratos this time around, but that doesn't mean he's going to stop ripping out insides and start inviting people to dinner. Expect this to be as bloody as always. Right: After the ludicrous scale of *God Of War III*, a smaller story might be what we need to rejuvenate excitement in Kratos's character.





God Of War: Ascension

CONCEPT ■ The latest *God Of War* features a brand new multiplayer component

He's already torn apart Olympus, so is it time for Kratos to hang up his Blades of Chaos?

Kratos may have battled Titans and brought Olympus to its knees, but his greatest challenge might be overcoming expectations.

God Of War traditionally has set the bar high. Graphically, it's practically unrivalled on PlayStation, and when it comes to bloody brutality, you can't look much further than Kratos' defeat of Hermes by slicing off the fleet-footed god's legs to claim his shoes. But *God Of War: Ascension* is the sixth instalment of *God Of War* in a little under eight years, which leaves Sony Santa Monica fighting to justify another outing for the ghost of Sparta.

Ascension is a prequel set ten years prior to 2005's *God Of War*, detailing Kratos's path of furious vengeance following his family's accidental murder. The concept might sound superfluous on paper, but Santa Monica is hoping that players will want to experience a more human side to Kratos, or, if they aren't bothered, at the very least will want to duke it out in the multiplayer.

games™ recently had hands-on time the multiplayer, which was somewhat sceptically received following its announcement, but we are happy to report that it makes a welcome addition to the standard single-player God-slaying that players have become accustomed to.

Two multiplayer modes were available in the closed beta: 'Favor of the Gods', a free-for-all gametype that pits four players against one another in mortal combat, and the aptly named 'Team Favor of the Gods' which, you guessed it, splits players into two teams of four in a King of the Hill-style gametype with a titan-sized twist.

The beta eased us into play with a helpful tutorial, first making us pledge allegiance to one of four Gods atop Mount Olympus. Doing this affects personal attributes, including strength, defence, and magical power. Zeus and Ares are available in the beta, though Hades and Poseidon will join in for the full release. It also introduces a new yet familiar combo system – moves are executed with fluidity and ease, which makes the game very accessible for new players to pick up and play.

/// Of course, the major interest lies with the gametypes themselves, and *God Of War* introduces a fun twist to the traditional online brawler. Favor of the Gods sees four players thrown into a coliseum at the behest of Heracles. It's what you expect: four hulking adonises pounding on each other until three are either headless on the ground or split right down the middle. Sometimes both.

It's a fun distraction, but aside from using it to grind kills for items and weapon upgrades, it suffers with having no matchmaking system. You can often find yourself up against characters who have gear that makes them statistically better than anyone else in the arena, making it very difficult to get kills. This is an easy fix for Santa Monica, however, especially with release still a couple of months down the line.

Team Favor of the Gods will undoubtedly hold the most attention. Here, two teams of four will try to take control of shrines across the map to earn a reward from the Gods – The Spear of Olympus. Kills, looting chests and grisly acts also contribute to your score, in what seems to be a very fast and exciting multiplayer mode. In a classy homage to the ridiculous *God Of War* scale, a gigantic colossus sits atop the map, which the team holding the aforementioned Spear can attempt to dispatch and claim victory.

> "The most ambitious adventure in the series so far, Ascension takes us right back to where it all began"
>
> SONY PRESS RELEASE

We won't lie, Santa Monica has its work cut out for itself generating hype and interest in a new *God Of War* title after concluding the trilogy. *Ascension* certainly seems fun, and it will be a welcome distraction as we wait out the next generation, but it might finally be time for Kratos to hang up his Blades of Chaos for good.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS3
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Sony Santa Monica
Release: March
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Established in 1999, Sony Santa Monica is best known for development of the *God Of War* series, but has contributed to many of the PlayStation's most interesting titles. Everything from *flOw*, *Warhawk*, *Flower*, *Twisted Metal*, *PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale* and *The Last Guardian* have its fingerprints somewhere along the long road to development.

Developer History

Kinetica **2001 [PS2]**
God Of War **2005 [PS2]**
God Of War II **2007 [PS2]**
God Of War III **2010 [PS3]**

High Point

Sony Santa Monica introduced us to a world where Greek Mythology became warped and twisted





■ Above: Even the multiplayer is channelling the classic *God Of War* feel. The Desert of Lost Souls map has the Titan Cyclops Polyphemus sat atop it in chains. Get too close and he will no doubt crush you; get the Spear Of Olympus, though, and that eye becomes one hell of a great target.

WHAT SHARP TEETH YOU HAVE

DRACULA HAS ALL sorts of awesome powers at his disposal this time around, and it's not just the usual smoke and mirrors. If the footage doing the rounds is anything to go by, *Dynasty Warriors*-scale battles should be expected, with Dracula able to channel the power of evil to unleash supernatural whips and bats, taking on entire armies in his stride. He will need to drink blood to recharge though, so be sure to leave at least somebody alive at the slaughter. We wish the best of luck to the Belmont brothers on this one.

■ Above: Gabriel, in his new guise as Dracula, will need to drain blood to source his demonic powers. Below: *Castlevania* is moving out of the medieval age and into the present with *Lords Of Shadow 2*.





■ Above: Gabriel is noticeably weak and frail after his long sleep, though we doubt it will be long before he begins to regain his powers to start his supernatural reign of terror.

Castlevania: Lords Of Shadows 2

CONCEPT ■ Gabriel Belmont returns to Castlevania, with new powers, new problems and most importantly: a set of new sharp teeth.

The reign of the sparkling vampires is over, long live Dracula

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Origin: Spain
Publisher: Konami
Developer: MercurySteam
Release: Q2 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Formed by ex-members of Rebel Act Studios in Spain, MercurySteam came together after the release of *Severance: Blade Of Darkness* failed to earn a sequel. Working with Konami, and with the help of *Metal Gear* daddy Hideo Kojima, the team managed to make a breakthrough with the *Castlevania* series – taking it in a radically different direction.

Developer History

American McGee's Scrapland
2005 [PC,Xbox]

Clive Barker's Jericho
2007 [PC, X360, PS3]

Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow
2010 [X360, PS3]

Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2
2013 [X360,PS3]

High Point

Despite all expectations, it pumped fresh blood into the rather stagnant *Castlevania* series, with a game that pushed high-octane action into the traditional platform.

***Lords of Shadow* was a welcome rejuvenation for the long dormant *Castlevania* series, and while games™ secretly feared the *Shadows* saga would not be seen through to completion, developer MercurySteam is hell-bent on forging a memorable chapter for the Belmont family.**

Returning with a story spanning centuries, *Lords Of Shadow 2* picks up with Gabriel Belmont waking up in the modern day, weak and withered by time. Following the events of his 2010 outing, Gabriel has (spoilers!) transcended his mortal form, become Dracula and inherited a set of otherworldly powers. What does this mean for the sequel then? Tearing through modern and medieval times as the prince of darkness, obviously.

With teleportation, energy whips and transformation into a gigantic shadow bat now at our disposal, *Lords Of Shadow 2* is putting an immense amount of power into the players hands, though it simply wouldn't be a *Castlevania* game if you had full access to these supernatural forces from get-go, and *Lords Of Shadow 2* is true to its past in that respect. Dracula is vowing to reclaim his lost powers, which almost certainly will involve exploring the insides of a very large, very possessed Gothic cathedral.

The developer is keeping the story close to their chest, but the paradigm shift between Gabriel transcending from light into darkness will no doubt play heavily on the heartstrings, and while he seeks to break his immortal bonds, Lucifer's rumoured return – as well as a host of new big-bads – might just put that life goal on hold.

The sense of scale seems bigger than ever before; the vistas are stunning, the castles are looming, and – perhaps most importantly – the battles are indulging in a healthy amount of spectacle. The combat looks to be channelling the same hack-and-slash house of combat that *God Of War* has popularised in recent years, which usually lends itself to big, bloody battles with plenty of upgradeable weapons and items available.

MercurySteam and Konami are assuring us that the game is planned for current-generation consoles, though the early teasers say differently. The footage looks gorgeous, with the stunning Gothic architecture that has long defined the *Castlevania* series looking better than ever before.

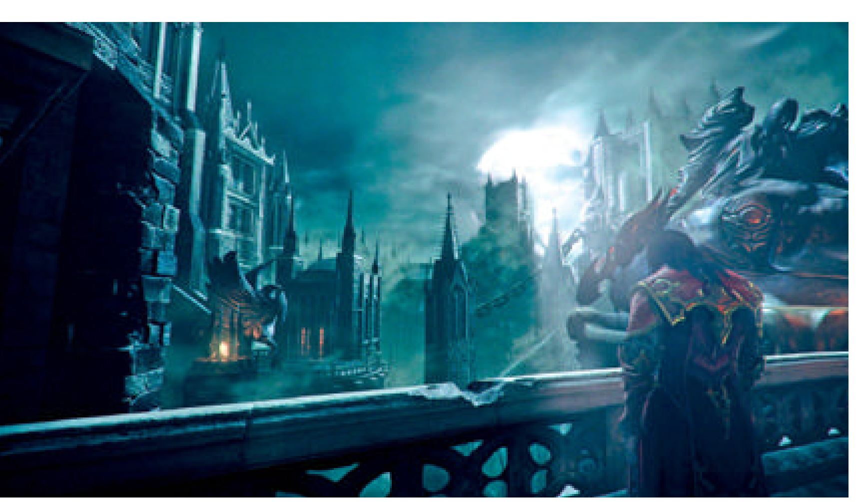
A big point of contention between fans of the series is the connection that *Lords Of Shadow* has to the wider heritage. The 2010 release included some nice nods to *Castlevania 2*, among others in the franchise, and thankfully this time around it looks like we will once again be seeing some old faces. *Lords Of Shadow 2* ties heavily into the 3DS's *Mirror Of Fate*, which acts as a bridge between the two console games.

Mirror Of Fate has series mainstays Trevor and Simon Belmont – Gabriel's son and grandson respectively – venturing into Dracula's castle in an attempt to halt his unearthly reign of darkness. Judging by the condition Gabriel finds himself in at the beginning of the VGAs trailer, they may have had some degree of success, though no word on whether they will be making appearances in *Lords Of Shadow 2* when it drops in the summer of 2013.

Whether the game sticks to its own path or attempts to widen the mythology doesn't bother us. *Lords Of Shadow* was a welcome addition to the *Castlevania* franchise, and in a world where triple-A action titles keep raising the stakes, it was thoroughly entertaining to get a lengthy, story driven, character centric competitor. *Lords Of Shadow 2* is launching against a smattering of huge titles, *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance, DmC Devil May Cry* and *God Of War: Ascension* to name but a few, so it will be interesting to see how it fairs.

MercurySteam has laid the groundwork for an epic instalment, lets see if it can draw blood from the same stone twice.

> "Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow successfully rebooted the franchise but now we want to go further"
> DAVE COX, MERCURYSTEAM





■ Left: *Lords Of Shadow 2* looks gorgeous, with the Gothic architecture making a welcome return. Hopefully MercurySteam will give us plenty of castles and cathedrals to explore.

1 THE SOUND of a heavy respirator and beeping heart monitors. "Please try to relax," says a doctor with a familiar face. "There's plenty of time." Potentially our first connection to a wider universe, the doctor bears a striking resemblance to *Metal Gear 2*'s Kio Marv.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Origin: Sweden (apparently)
Publisher: TBA
Developer: Moby Dick Studio
Release: TBA
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

Moby Dick is a ghost studio as far as we are concerned. Showing up unannounced at the VGAs, no one has ever heard of it nor has it ever released a game to date. Yet it is showing off a brand new IP running on, what looks like, Hideo Kojima's new FOX Engine. Pretty classy for a new developer...

Developer History

Metal Gear
1987 [NES]
Metal Gear Solid
1998 [PS2]
Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater
2004 [PS2]
Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots
2008 [PS3]

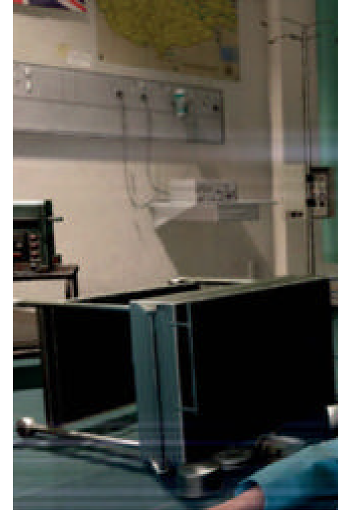
High Point

Assuming it is *Metal Gear* daddy Hideo Kojima at the helm of this little ruse, then his steering of the franchise over two decades is reason enough to get excited.

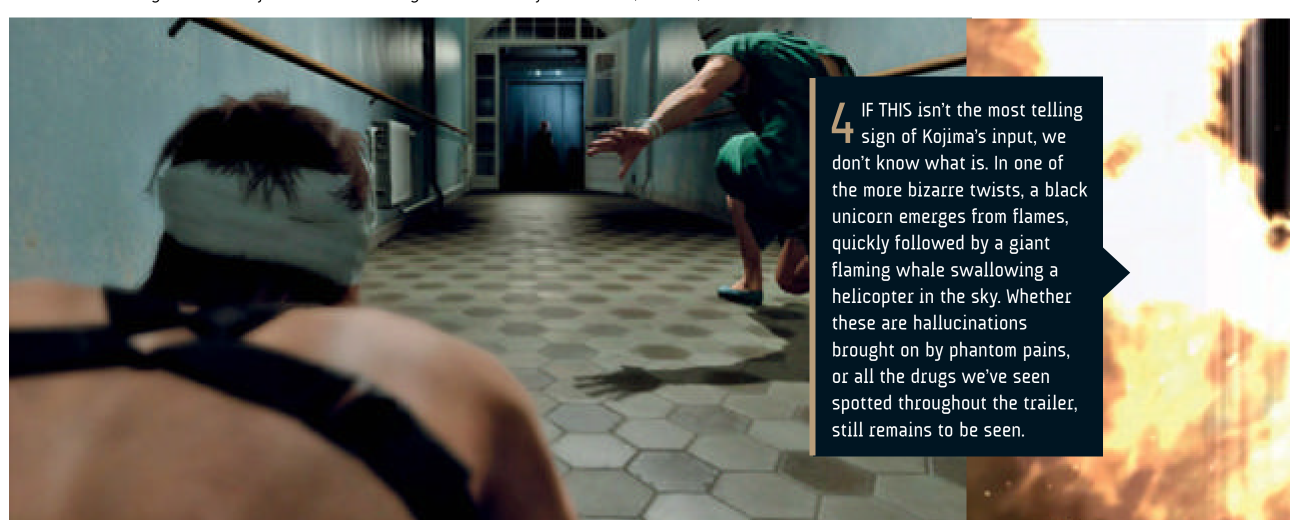
The Phantom Pain

CONCEPT ■ A new IP from a brand new studio at the tail end of the generation, and that isn't the only suspicious thing about *The Phantom Pain*.

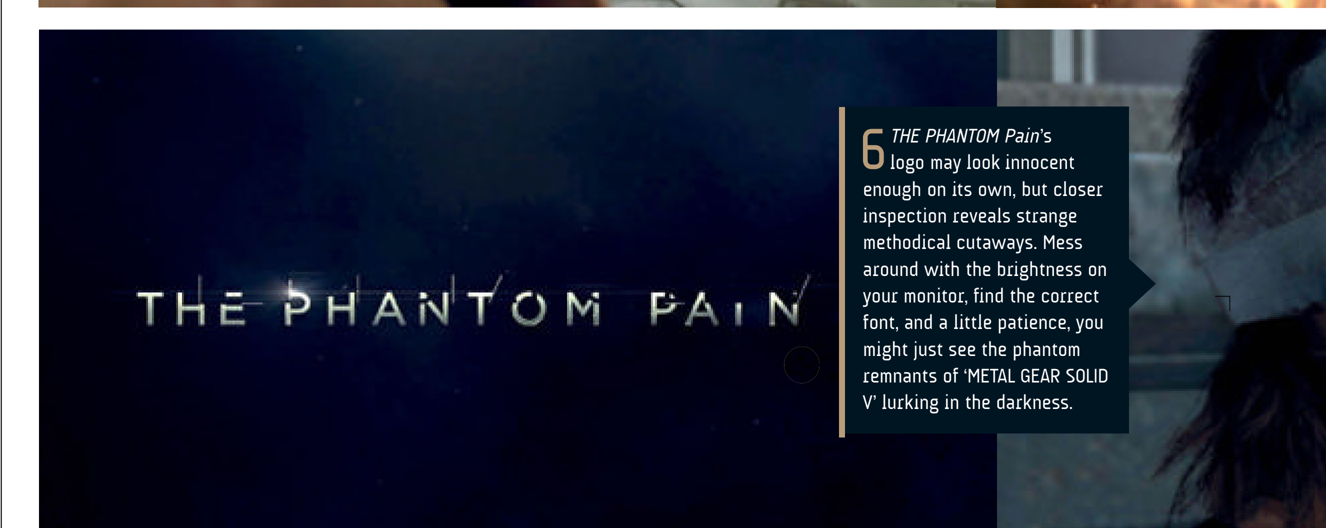
Metal Gear in all but name?



The VGAs had perhaps their biggest year yet in 2012, with all the talk focused on an exciting start to the New Year. There were a few surprises throughout, and perhaps the biggest came from Moby Dick Studio. You're forgiven if you don't recognise the name, we don't either. The studio, and its CEO Joakim Mogren, are unknown entities – surprising in a time where the cost of triple-A development continues to skyrocket. There's been suggestion that it's all a front, that *The Phantom Pain* is actually *Metal Gear Solid 5* in disguise. This is just the sort of thing prolific developer Hideo Kojima would pull, in fact why don't you try rearranging the first name of that CEO from Moby Dick? All the evidence is pointing to this being the next game in the *Metal Gear* franchise, but with only one trailer and a handful of screenshots to go by, the jury is still out. If *The Phantom Pain* does turn out to be a new IP, it will certainly have a lot to answer for; the comparisons are uncanny. If you're still unsure after watching the trailer, it's also worth remembering that Konami employees were snapped in a VIP area wearing Moby Dick shirts, and no, none of them were Swedish.



4 IF THIS isn't the most telling sign of Kojima's input, we don't know what is. In one of the more bizarre twists, a black unicorn emerges from flames, quickly followed by a giant flaming whale swallowing a helicopter in the sky. Whether these are hallucinations brought on by phantom pains, or all the drugs we've seen spotted throughout the trailer, still remains to be seen.



6 *THE PHANTOM Pain*'s logo may look innocent enough on its own, but closer inspection reveals strange methodical cutaways. Mess around with the brightness on your monitor, find the correct font, and a little patience, you might just see the phantom remnants of 'METAL GEAR SOLID V' lurking in the darkness.



2 WE DON'T know why our mysterious lookalike is in hospital, nor what series of unfortunate events led him to getting a prosthetic limb fitted in place of his left arm, but this brief glimpse of a car crash followed by the shower of pills could have been it.

3 COLONEL 'THUNDERBOLT' Volgin may have been put out of action by the end of *Metal Gear Solid 3*, but like all rules in *Metal Gear*, they are only made to later be broken. The red rubber suit, his glowing eyes and imposing build sure support the Volgin theory, could this also be the mysterious scarred figure in the *Ground Zeroes* trailer?

5 ONE OF the more intriguing images in this trailer is the floating doll seen in the closing seconds. Floating ominously out of view, it bares a striking resemblance to classic villain Psycho Mantis. This would also lend a slightly more sane explanation as to where that whale came from.

7 KOJIMA CAN play it coy, but this character has an uncanny resemblance to one 'Naked Snake' aka Big Boss. Put up against *Metal Gear: Ground Zeroes* and it's easy enough to make the comparison. The stance, the eyepatch, the awesome beard – did they think we wouldn't recognise one of gaming's greatest protagonists?



Inset: All hell breaking loose in multiplayer mode Echelon, where players have to work as a team and survive the gradually increasing onslaught of enemies.

Inset: You'll find enemy weaponry is more advanced than yours so you'll have to strategise with old fashioned team work and alien substance infused guns. Just like the old days.

Fuse

CONCEPT *Mission Impossible*, *The Expendables* and *Resistance* all contribute to the rearing of *Fuse*, Insomniac's upcoming futuristic shooter.

Around the world

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: California, US
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Developer: Insomniac Games
Release: March 2013
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Brian Allgeier, *Fuse*'s Creative Director, is a man who knows a thing or two about action-adventure games. His impressive CV boasts household names such as the entire *Ratchet & Clank* series, *Resistance: Fall of Man* and *Spyro 2* and *3* – all within the space of a decade.

Developer History

Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time
2009 [PS3]

Resistance: Fall of Man
2006 [PS3]

Ratchet & Clank
2002 [PS2]

Spyro 3:Year of the Dragon
2000 [PSone]

High Point

Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal was the culmination of a well-honed method of storytelling, improved graphics and extensive line up of weaponry.

We quizzed Brian Allgeier, creative director of upcoming futuristic third person shooter *Fuse*, about Roswell, the game's influences and how four-player co-op really works online.

Fuse has undergone a significant visual transformation since it was first announced in June 2011. What lies beyond the superficial?

Fuse is an action-packed co-op game where you're playing as one of a team of operatives who are using Fuse-powered weaponry. The whole game centres around Fuse, which is an alien substance that, when mixed with natural material, becomes very volatile. We got our inspiration from movies like *Mission: Impossible*, which have that team-based espionage element, but also the weapons of *District 9*.

Insomniac is renowned for its innovative weaponry. Does that legacy extend with _Fuse_?

So each character has a primary ability. For example, Dalton Brooks has a shield that he can use to protect himself and other players. Izzy Sinclair has a Shatter Gun, which can crystallise enemies. All of these weapons are based on Fuse plus a natural substance so Izzy's weapon is Fuse plus black melanite. Jacob Kimble has an Arcshot, which is an electric crossbow – he fuses liquid mercury with the alien substance. Then you've got Naya Deveraux who uses a Warp Rifle, (her weapon is based on Fuse mixed with anti-matter) which creates this black hole that sucks enemies in and crushes them.

As you play through, you earn Fuse points, which is essentially XP. Each character has an upgradeable ability. So Dalton can upgrade his ability to drop his shield anywhere on the battlefield for other players to use. Naya can upgrade her ability so she can go invisible. Izzy acquires a Healing Crystal, which is basically a reverse grenade that heals nearby teammates. Jacob acquires burn damage, which means he can fire multiple shots and ignite them to burn enemies when he so chooses. There's a lot of upgrading to do.

> "Inspiration [came] from movies like Mission Impossible, but also the weapons of District 9"
> BRIAN ALLGEIER, FUSE'S CREATIVE DIRECTOR

How are these Fuse-powered weapons replenished? Do you pick up Fuse capsules?
Raven [a rogue military organisation] are transporting a lot of Fuse elements. So you will be acquiring Fuse-powered weapons from them throughout your campaign.

So since Fuse can be upgraded in this way, we imagine that Raven can upgrade its weaponry too. Will there be weaponry, used by Raven, that's unavailable to the players, even if they upgrade?
Yes, there will be a couple. But the cool thing is you can pick those up if you destroy one of the enemies and carry it until you use up all of the ammo.

Multiplayer is obviously an integral part of *Fuse*'s DNA…
There's Echelon, which is a wave and round-based game. Every six rounds there's going to be a mini-boss or a high value target. Then in the last round there's a final boss who's the prime threat. There's also four other multiplayer modes. Critical drop, where you drop supplies down to teammates for them to re-equip. Countdown, where you're transporting Fuse between point A and point B - you really have to use teamwork here to protect the guy holding it. The package also emits Fuse energy, which powers up all of your weapons. Then there's Hot Zone where you have to protect a Fuse cell in one location as lots of enemies come in. And, finally, Carnage where loads of enemies come at you and you have to survive the wave.

How does the hosting system work? It could become a bit of a headache trying to organise four people to play. Do they have different save files?
You can either join a game with friends or be randomly selected to play with other online players. If a player drops out, the AI takes over and that player then becomes selectable so you can switch to the AI player and use their special weaponry and upgrades. Checkpoints are selectable too so you don't have to start a new game every time you play the campaign missions with new people.

So where is this alien substance from?
Essentially, it was discovered in the early Fifties, late Forties.

Is it linked to the heavily rumoured Roswell alien landings?
I couldn't possibly say. The United States government experimented on it and not until recently did they learn of its power. The paramilitary organisation Raven finds out about it and raids the facility and takes the Fuse sources. Overstrike 9 has to track down Raven across the globe and stop them from using it to make devastating weapons.



Inset: A member of the evil organisation – Raven – behind the Fuse heist is dispatched with an up close melee attack whilst the rest of the team get to work on the snipers. Players will often perform different roles in the game and you'll find yourself switching intermittently between covering fire and flanker extraordinaire.

YOU'RE FIRED!

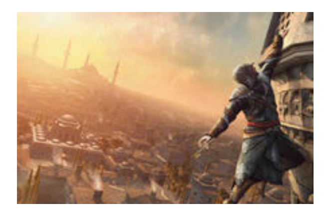
LEVELS ARE littered with, as Brian Allgeier describes them, "mini-bosses". Rest assured that there is nothing mini about these machine gun micro managers. Fighting is intentionally varied to ensure the player makes use of the cooperative features and abilities. Although dispatching henchmen is fairly straightforward, these mini-bosses require fire from all angles and a combination of exceptionally powerful weaponry. Brian explains: "You'll get a boss like the Enforcer – a big powerful robot. He launches motor attacks, he also will use a lasso attack to draw you in and melee you. Then there's the Leadfoot and Leadfire who use a Fuse-powered Gatling Gun and Fuse-powered Flamethrower respectively. You have to shoot them in the back, that's how you'll take them down quicker. So a bit of teamwork is necessary."

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

ASSASSIN'S CREED: UTOPIA

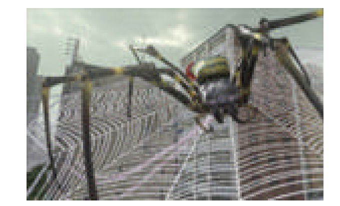
Format: iOS, Android
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: GREE
ETA: February 2013



THE SERIES has made the transition to mobile platforms with varying degrees of success over the years, but GREE's upcoming *Utopia* might be the weirdest attempt to capture its spirit yet. Blending city building with turn-based *Advance Wars*-esque combat, it's not yet known whether these disparate mechanics will form a cohesive playing experience. Even if it doesn't come together, it sure does look pretty.

EARTH DEFENSE 2025

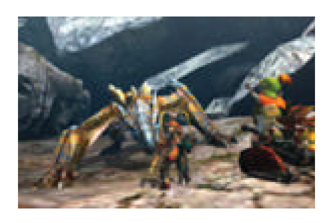
Format: X360, PS3
Publisher: D3Publisher
Developer: In-House
ETA: 2013



EARTH DEFENSE Force represents something we don't get enough of in videogames today: ridiculous fun. Sure, sometimes things don't work as they should, but you can bring the entire city to your feet with a rocket launcher, so we aren't complaining. There was a worry *Earth Defense 4* wouldn't make it over here, but under the guise of '2025' it looks like giant monster-insect battles are coming to our shores.

MONSTER HUNTER 4

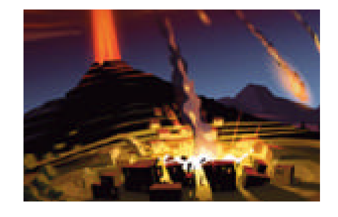
Format: 3DS
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



MONSTER HUNTER looked on track for its March release, but Capcom has announced that it's being pushed back to summer 2013 to add some extra polish. It's a shame, as the game is promising to be bigger and more story-driven then ever before. With a focus on new combat techniques, like being able to scale walls and monsters, we can't wait to see what Capcom is getting out of Nintendo's 3DS.

PROJECT GODUS

Format: PC, iOS, Android
Publisher: 22 Cans
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2013



POPULOUS, THE original god game, is back. Sort of. Peter Molyneux's 22 Cans studio managed to successfully fund its ambitious reinvention of *Populous* via Kickstarter and *GODUS* development is well underway. Molyneux has always been an ideas man, so seeing what he brings to a genre he helped pioneer with 24 years' experience under his belt is an exciting prospect for sure.

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW – MIRROR OF FATE

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Konami
Developer: MercurySteam
ETA: March 2013



KONAMI HAS kept tight-lipped about *Lords Of Shadow 2*, presumably to keep gamers talking about its 3DS prequel *Mirror Of Fate*. Set 25 years after events of the 2010 hit release, it follows Trevor and Simon Belmont doing what they do best, battling Dracula in a creepy-looking mansion. Abandoning the action-adventure antics of its siblings, expect a return to Castlevania's side-scrolling roots.

DRAGON QUEST VII

Format: 3DS
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: ArtePiazza
ETA: February 2013 (JPN)



ORIGINALLY RELEASED at the dawn of the millennium for PSone, *Dragon Quest VII* sadly never made it into Europe, though we're now a little closer to getting our fix. Coming this February (to Japan), ArtePiazza is developing a 3DS port with updated visuals to take advantage of the system's 3D effects. No word on a localisation for the West, but we hope Square doesn't make the same mistake twice.

PROFESSOR LAYTON VS ACE ATTORNEY

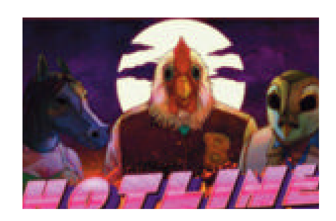
Format: 3DS
Publisher: Level-5
Developer: Capcom/Level-5
ETA: Q3 2013



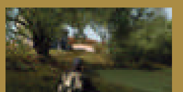
ONE OF the more unexpected mash-ups we've seen. Professor Layton teams up with Phoenix Wright to solve the mysteries of Labyrinth City. Blending the Puzzle and Trial features that make each respective game so popular, this is one we are desperate to play. With the 3DS region-locked and a release date not in sight, we might be waiting a while, or spending lots on an import bundle.

HOTLINE MIAMI 2

Format: Mac, PC
Publisher: TBA
Developer: Dennaton Games
ETA: TBA



THE EIGHTIES-inspired, ultra violent, top-down shooter *Hotline Miami* is getting a sequel. Don't expect it any time soon, though. While the world is still completely enamoured with Hotline's hypnotising stance on murder, developer Dennaton Games is hard at work expanding the planned DLC into a full-blown follow-up. A preliminary soundtrack is already in place, which is more than enough to get us excited.



DELAYED – DAY Z (PC)

The standalone version has been delayed due to major changes made to the game's engine. But we can expect a new interface, updated level design and support for customisable and degradable weapons.



RESURRECTED – InSane

Guillermo del Toro's exciting new IP had been cancelled. But it seems the *Hellboy* director has already found a new studio to finish development, though he's reluctant to name names just yet.

FIRE EMBLEM: AWAKENING

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Intelligent Systems**
ETA: **March 2013**



A NEW *Fire Emblem* game is always cause for excitement, a testament to strategy games that aren't afraid to kick you where it hurts every once in a while. Permadeath follows every turn, a distressing thought when you consider how awesome the characters tend to be. The latest trailer alluded to fan-favourite Marth making a surprising return. Either way, we can't wait to defend the kingdom all over again.

EDGE OF TWILIGHT

Format: **X360, PS3**
Publisher: **Fuzzyeyes Entertainment**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **2013**



After development was halted in 2009, we had long thought *Edge Of Twilight* was simply another casualty of rising development costs. Luckily, developer Fuzzyeyes Entertainment has rescued the project after a shift in management, promising to get this ambitious new steampunk action-adventure title out for early 2013. Even as we prepare to wave good-bye to this generation, there's always time to check out new IP.

THE WALKING DEAD: SURVIVAL INSTINCT

Format: **X360, PS3, PC**
Publisher: **Activision**
Developer: **Terminal Reality**
ETA: **2013**



ONE OF the biggest surprises to come out of the series' transition to TV is the huge popularity of the Dixon brothers. This 'Survival-FPS' is a prequel to the AMC series that gave them life, and while little footage has been shown, the recent announcement that Michael Rooker and Norman Reedus would be reprising their roles as Merle and Daryl Dixon at least lends credence to us getting an authentic experience.

YOUNG JUSTICE: LEGACY

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Little Orbit**
Developer: **Little Orbit**
ETA: **2013**



WHILE THE Cartoon Network series has inexplicably disappeared from the schedules, this upcoming action-RPG should delight fans. Written in collaboration with writers of the TV series, it is set to explore the five-year gap between season one and two. Considering how hastily the series was pulled from the network earlier in the year, this might be the last of *Young Justice* we'll get for a while.

DARK

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Kalypso Media**
Developer: **RealmForge Studios**
ETA: **TBA**



STEALTH-ACTION games have made a renaissance of sorts in recent times, and RealmForge is aiming to give its own spin on the genre. Unearthing the secrets of a global corporation as a creature of the night, *Dark* is promising to add a wide variety of vampiric skills to the standard stealth arsenal. If *Splinter Cell* meets vampires sounds like your sort of thing, then this should be one to watch in 2013.

STATE OF DECAY

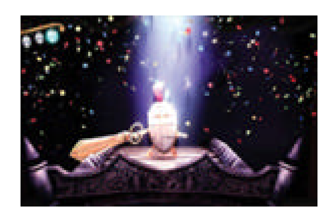
Format: **X360, PC**
Publisher: **Microsoft Studios**
Developer: **Undead Labs**
ETA: **March 2013**



THERE'S NO shortage of zombie games, but this one could be different. While you can roam around as a zombie-killing badass, emphasis is placed on survival. You can build shelter, farm resources and assemble a group of survivors to prepare for the forthcoming apocalypse. But with the threat of permadeath looming, it will be carefully considered decisions that'll win the day.

PUPPETEER

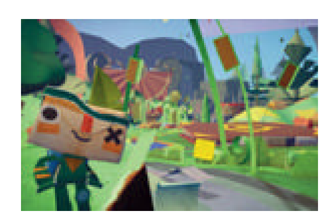
Format: **PS3**
Publisher: **Sony**
Developer: **SCE Studios Japan**
ETA: **2013**



SONY HAS plenty of big exclusives lined up for 2013, but it might be Puppeteer that has us the most intrigued. Framed around a young boy named Kutaro, he has the misfortune of being transformed into a puppet and loosing his head by the paw's of the Moon Bear King. A journey to reclaim his form, aided by a pair of otherworldly scissors ensures – think Little Big Planet dripping with gothic overtones.

TEARAWAY

Format: **PSVita**
Publisher: **Sony**
Developer: **Media Molecule**
ETA: **2013**



WHATEVER THE creative force behind *LittleBigPlanet* turned its attention to next was always likely to cause a storm of attention – indeed, any info on *Tearaway* is being eagerly lapped up by the gaming world. A papercraft game that utilises all of the Vita's features in new and inventive ways, its developer is apparently close to finalising the proof of concept. Hopefully we'll see some more gameplay footage soon.



WHY I ♥...

ICO

PETER MOLYNEUX, 22CANS

"The things I have played recently that I found really inspiring are things like Journey *on Playstation 3. I found that inspiring because it's mystical and unique, [but] I think I'm just going to settle on* Ico*. It was unbelievably groundbreaking – way, way ahead of its time. In terms of the environment and feel, it still hasn't been surpassed.*

"It spoke to a type of game that we're still ignoring, something with mechanics that feed so well into the story. Ico *wasn't particularly successful but it was immensely influential."*

"It spoke to a type of game that we're still ignoring, something with mechanics that feed so well into the story"

PETER MOLYNEUX, 22CANS



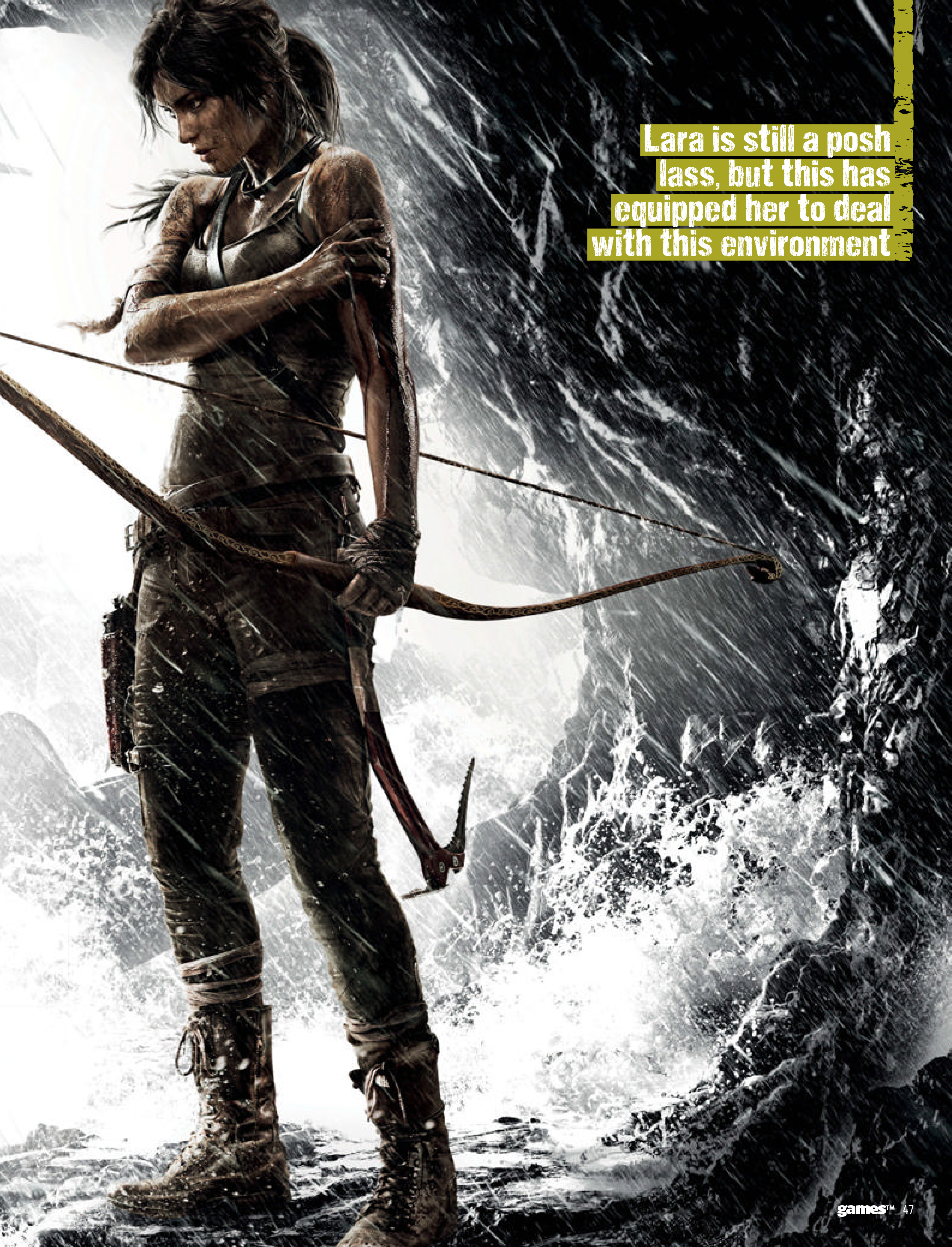


Welcome To The Jungle

Lara developer Crystal Dynamics tells us about multiplayer, music and rebooting gaming's most famous female protagonist

Of the three big games coming out early next year, Lara Croft's seems the one set in the most hostile environment. Sure, *Bioshock Infinite* is set at a bone-shattering height, but the environment doesn't actively try to kill you. Sure, *DmC*'s environment *does* try to kill you, but that's fair enough considering it's facing off against the devil-angel hybrids of Dante and Vergil. Whereas Lara is just an upper class girl in an extremely treacherous environment, a dangerous island full of men and monsters that want to kill, terrorise and/or eat her. Needless to say, Lara is not going to have an easy time.

Indeed, as one of the *Tomb Raider* writers Rhianna Pratchett (yes, Terry's daughter, but more importantly a talented writer in her own right) emphasises Lara *is* still a posh lass, but this has equipped her to deal with this environment. "You know Lara comes from the British public school system, as did I, so she's been taught both shooting and archery at school. As has Camilla (Parker-Bowles)." (It's amazing the things that you learn from computer


Lara is still a posh lass, but this has equipped her to deal with this environment

games. Including, apparently, don't annoy Prince Charles's missus or she'll shoot you.)

But we're jumping ahead of ourselves. We've written before (issue 130) about how the game is rebooting *Tomb Raider*, changing it to a mix of RPG, survival horror and its original action-adventure, but we hadn't covered it in much detail. This time around we're going to be comprehensive. We've been to Crystal Dynamics, we've talked to all the main developers, we've seen the multiplayer, and we're guaranteeing this is the most in-depth look at the game you'll see until it comes out on 5 March.

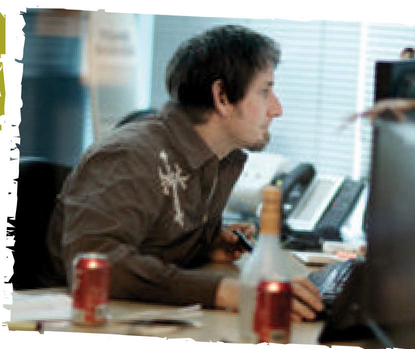
To reprise; what we know so far is that Lara is no longer the hard-nosed, Indiana Jones in ladies' shorts who creator Toby Gard described as an anti-hero. She's also not the simplistic Nineties objectified woman that Pratchett remembers; "When people talk about the over-sexualisation of female characters, Lara was the first one that people really talk about. That might be unfair; she became the pin-up girl for over-sexualisation, but there were other ones out there who were much, much worse."

No, the new Lara is young and untried, a posh university graduate who only cares about her friends and the discovery of the lost kingdom of Queen Himiko. The opening sequence has Lara washed up on a strange island, after her ship (the ironically-named 'Endurance') has joined hundreds of others from history in being wrecked on the island's shores. After a short tutorial sequence (shown at E3 2011 and changed little since then) where she escapes from a murderous troglodyte in an underground cave, she's set loose on this island, to survive and find other survivors. She's injured, she's hungry and she's utterly scared. "We show her as upset and vulnerable," says Pratchett, "not because she's a woman, but because she's a 21-year-old on her own in the savage wilderness and not knowing what to do."



The development team are well aware of how much of a gamble it is to remove that sense of authority from Lara. "We knew it was a risk showing this very strong, iconic female character in a situation where she didn't start strong and felt uncertain and scared, because people like to see strong female characters," Pratchett says. "It was risky. People weren't certain at the start of this, and there was a lot of talk about us breaking Lara. I don't we've broken her; we've rewound her to the point that the traits that are Lara Croft: Tomb Raider are there, but buried beneath the surface, so that they can bubble out during the game, so she can discover herself as well."

Ultimately, there's a darkness that she won't ever cross



So Lara redux isn't a spelunking and exploration expert; she doesn't know how to kill a T-Rex and would be more than surprised to encounter one. And, though this is an origin story, she's no superhero, as Noah Hughes, creative director at Crystal Dynamics explains; "I think of her as a real person. Believable and grounded. Superheroes *can* be believeable and grounded, but when you hear the word superhero that's not the first thing that comes to mind. She's extraordinary, but we hope she's still believable."

Unlike *Far Cry 3*'s Jason though, Lara isn't going to go native. "The way we play it is to make sure that her motivations are relatable." says Hughes. "Ultimately, there's a darkness that she won't ever cross. That was one of the big goals with this first two hours of the game: rather than go straight to the gameplay actions, to sell them as actions that are motivated by character in a way that is relatable." In this sense, Lara's



Pratchett on writers in games

"Developers need to get writers involved early. They need to figure out the right communication loop, who they're going to contact, how often they'll talk. At the same time, writers need to know what to ask for, who to speak to, are they going to have access to level designers, and so on. Personally, I like going on site, working with the developers, fighting those battles and then go away doing the writing on my own, rolling around in the muse juice in my own writer hobbit burrow... Separate writers a lot from the team and it does impact a lot. It's happened to every writer friend that I know where they've worked on a game and felt that the story sits on top of the gameplay trifle like narrative custard."



Crystal Dynamics cites *The Legend Of Zelda* series as a source of influence for the reboot.

While it's unlikely that you'll encounter a carnivorous T-Rex on the island boss battles remain integral to the *Tomb Raider* DNA.

Pratchett on the first Lara Croft

"She became bigger than the game. My mum knows who she is. The large-busted image of her stuck with lots of people. She became a caricature. When you think of her as big boobs, double-pistols and being British; you don't think much about her character. But then, being an icon is usually quite visual. It was a big challenge, having Angelina Jolie's face and going back to the genesis of action games, the first heroine."

story is fairly linear; though players can explore the island, the team know the story they're telling you and you won't have any control over it.

Not all the story is told from Lara's point of view; she also finds a video camera, left behind by her captured friend, Sam, that provides flashbacks to life on the ship, which was a weird combination of archaeological expedition and reality TV show, led by a cowardly archaeologist called Whitman (who causes all sorts of problems later). Similarly, As Lara explores, she finds diaries all over the island; some are Whitman's, some Sam's, some are the mysterious Matthias's, and some from the previous generations of inhabitants, including WWII Japanese soldiers, Himiko's people, and medieval sailors.

Yet though the team control the story, you have a choice in how you approach it, through combat, 'traversal', and puzzle-solving. "The boundaries aren't absolute," says Hughes. "Sometimes they blur; traversal is sometimes important in solving a puzzle. With each, we tried to infuse it with flavours; even in combat, you can have a smart approach, a sort of combat puzzle. That's the final bit; we defined the pace for the critical path and then gave players the tools to alter that pace if they wanted to."

So if you want, you can just run through the world, never looking back; or you track back through the world over and over to ferret every last item out of every last nook. "Being an old school gamer, things like *Zelda* used beautiful structures." Says Hughes. "It brought you past things you couldn't do and then brought you back to them on the critical path. Being exposed to that, being incapable of overcoming an obstacle, and then being capable of it... Lara's growth is one of the most important things in this game, and that's a way to express it."

As we progress with the gameplay, we experience the first hub system, a range of firepits Lara can fast-travel between and where Lara levels up herself and her items. The weapon upgrade system is based on scrap-gathering from enemies, animals and in-world junk and the three skill trees available to Lara – Survivor, Hunter and Brawler – include elements that massively increase your scrap-gathering speed.

At this stage, Lara starts learning to kill. First, bunnies and deer (for food/scrap) and





● Lara's arsenal will evolve throughout her stay on the island. However, while she'll be handling plenty of firearms, crafting her own weapons remains essential.

● Square Enix has clearly given the reboot substantial financial backing to ensure that it matches up to its triple-A competitors.

Stewart on the engine

"Everything we build is in the Crystal Engine. We gave it to Eidos Montreal for *Deus Ex*. It's an organic substance which we can pull apart and rebuild as we see fit. *Deux Ex* was a very different game from *Tomb Raider*, but the engine is solid. We built it for *Legend*, but for the future, for 5, 10, 15 years. *Legend* was about linear movement, joined by load screens. For *Tomb Raider*, we wanted good traversal, weather, lighting. The team went away and rebuilt the engine for it. This next project we're working on, we're building it in the Crystal engine, but we've dedicated an entire team of 15 people to deliver our engine to those guys. It's still the Crystal engine, but you won't recognise it by the time these guys have finished working on it."

then the scavengers who have captured many of the ship's crew, and who attempt to take her too. Notably, the scavengers are all men – but when we ask where all the women are, Stewart says "you'll have to play the game for that one".

Now, despite her public school upbringing, Lara cries over the first stag she kills, apologising to it as she's gutting it for dinner, and has a proper breakdown over the first man. "She's certainly outdoorsy, but not the kind of outdoorsy where people are trying to kill you," says Pratchett.

Thankfully, Lara has her mentor and parents' friend, the rough northerner Roth to lean on, when she finally catches up with him. "She reaches out to Roth for help because he's the kind of guy who knows where the bodies are buried and he's capable in those situations." (Roth, intriguingly, has twin pistols, like Lara of old.) Roth gruffly reassures her the first time she wipes out a small platoon by herself, but she's already becoming hardened, saying "it was scary how easy it was."

It's not that she's not still feeling every death inside – but that she's burying it. "Speaking to that mindset, she certainly doesn't cry any more after that point," says Pratchett "but with her journals, you can see that's she is very aware that she can't think about it. If she thinks about it she'll start to feel too much and she'll be incapable of doing anything. She does deliberately push it to the back of her mind and it does keep bubbling to the surface."

By the end of the hands-on demo, we've managed to upgrade Lara's arsenal (bow, climbing tool, pistol, machine gun,

● Crystal Dynamics' San Francisco offices are a treasure trove of rare Lara Croft memorabillia.

She's certainly outdoorsy, but not the kind of outdoorsy where people are trying to kill you

and the new trench gun) as far as we can, but Hughes shows us more, skipping us ahead to a part much later in the game, as Lara is approaching a Scavenger-occupied shanty-town beneath a mammoth ancient palace. To further upgrade her weaponry, he gathers weapon parts from crates as he goes; this lets you upgrade your makeshift bow into a recurve bow, say, which has additional abilities and upgrade slots. Each weapon has in total around ten upgrades to take it to its final form.

Similarly, once Lara has levelled her skills up enough, she becomes hardened and unlocks a new bunch of more effective skills, as well as the ability to use her climbing axe in combat. So her simple dodge melee counter becomes a stun where she stabs an enemy with an arrow to the knee; if she further upgrades this at the third and final tier, it becomes an insta-kill throat stab.

She also gets a few more tricks from her bow, her new recognisable weapon, including flaming arrows and rope arrows. As with all her weapons, they double as puzzle tools, allowing access to previously-inaccessible areas in earlier hubs. She does this by visiting a hub location and travelling on the world map, much like *Skyrim* – though it also keeps track of levels of completion of each area.

In this new section, we also saw many other ways Lara ends up moving through the world, not all of them voluntary, as she flees a collapsing tomb which has some spoilerific challenges in it; watching her sliding down slopes on her bottom, speed-running across falling scenery, and eventually falling from a bomber cockpit towards a forest, before opening a hastily-grabbed parachute and paragliding closer to the castle – and seriously injuring herself as she plummet through the trees. Unlike most games, this extended sequence is mainly in your control.

"She reopens the wound from the beginning of the game and it's a nearly fatal wound," explains Stewart. She follows that up with a scramble for a crashed rescue helicopter and its medical supplies – which are long gone, save for a lighter. In a gruesome *Rocky* moment, Lara heats an arrow head and gets ready to cauterise the wound... With reference to *Descent* and *Rambo* elsewhere in the game, it's obvious that the team are calling back to people's emotional triggers from the movies. "They're moments that make the hair stand up on the back of your neck," says Stewart.



Anatomy of a grave-robber

Eyes

Raider Vision, or whatever it's called, lets you see through Lara's Croft-O-Matic eyes, adding an overlay to the world reflecting her ability to see useful things. Most of us in her situation would just run through the jungle, ignoring the great piles of loot.

Fists

Lara is about as effective as Batman at taking down enemies – though unlike the caped crusader she kills them. Indeed, even the Solari scavengers comment on this, shouting out "It's only one girl!" and getting quite, quite scared at Lara's proficiency with guns and her climbing tools.

Wound

The very first action the player does also injures Lara for the rest of the game.

Legs

Lara is indefatigable, happily running back and forth across the island for literally miles, to get back to a base camp that might have just one extra box for her to rummage through and pummel for scrap and weapon parts.

Head

Packed full of useless crap from a pish-posh public school, like Cheltenham's Lady College, Lara knows every last bit of irrelevant history from the era of Queen Himiko, how to gut and skin a deer, and the best time and method for the service of cucumber sandwiches (no crusts). Tragically, cucumbers are extinct on the island.

Heart

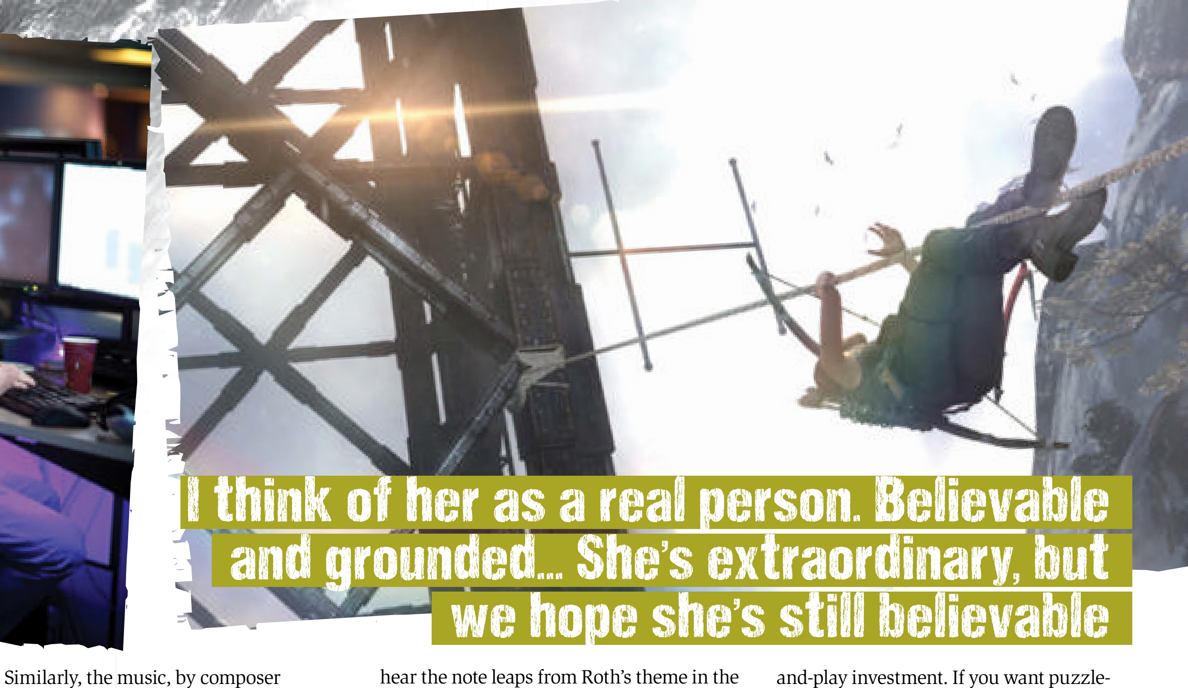
This Lara is less of an anti-hero than the earlier model, surrounding herself with friends.

Belly

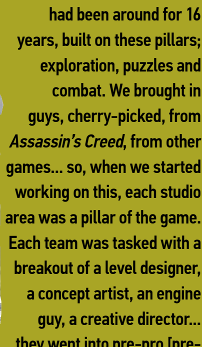
Lara needs to eat like any other action hero. Though there are signs of a disappeared food survival mechanic, it's been reduced down to a hunting mechanic, where you can encounter animals as you're wandering the island – deer, rabbits, crows and boar all appear in different areas - and kill them for different amounts of scrap.

Pratchett on the mix of mo-cap and animation

"Mo-cap is better for body performance but it always needs some messing with at the animation end, when it comes to facial performance. The cheapest shot in a movie is the face, someone talking; in a game, that's the most expensive shot. Certainly getting that fidelity of emotion, you can get some of it from motion capture, but you need someone working on it afterwards; I think we've got some points where that really comes through. You need to use everything you can to tell the story; animation, environmental storytelling, mechanics, everything contributes."



I think of her as a real person. Believable and grounded... She's extraordinary, but we hope she's still believable



Stewart on rebooting

"*Tomb Raider*, to be a success, couldn't just look at all the competitors and replicate them. We had something special that had been around for 16 years, built on these pillars; exploration, puzzles and combat. We brought in guys, cherry-picked, from *Assassin's Creed*, from other games... so, when we started working on this, each studio area was a pillar of the game. Each team was tasked with a breakout of a level designer, a concept artist, an engine guy, a creative director... they went into pre-pro [pre-production], they all took a focus of a level, implemented everything into it and came back to us and said "Here's what that pillar means to us". So when we finished pre-production, we had three separate demos that explored each of our pillars, for today's audience. We amalgamated that into the demo that was ultimately shown at E3 in 2011. Then we broke them back into tech, art, design teams, et cetera."

Similarly, the music, by composer Jason Graves (who worked on *Dead Space*, alongside a hundred other games), draws on familiar themes. "I tend to fall back to classical composers like Tchaikovsky - some of the most beautiful and memorable melodies ever written" he says "and Stravinsky – a true pioneer of more modern harmonies and creative orchestration. It seems I have an inherent fondness for that Russian dramatic flair!"

The main theme is focused on, and built from, Lara herself. "She's fresh out of school and has never been on any adventures yet." He tells us. "She's still naive and inexperienced – I wanted her theme to reflect these ideas. It's simple yet memorable and can be redressed in any number of ways. But my favourite version is the original piano solo I submitted as the first demonstration of her theme. It's the most basic, vulnerable form."

On top of that, Roth, Mathias and the island all have their separate themes, reflecting how important they are to the story. "Each theme is influenced by the others as the game, and its story, progress. For example, the general shape of Lara's theme, which exists as a few notes at the beginning of the game, is strongly influenced by Roth's theme, who is her mentor. By the end of the game, you can hear the note leaps from Roth's theme in the fully formed version of Lara's theme."

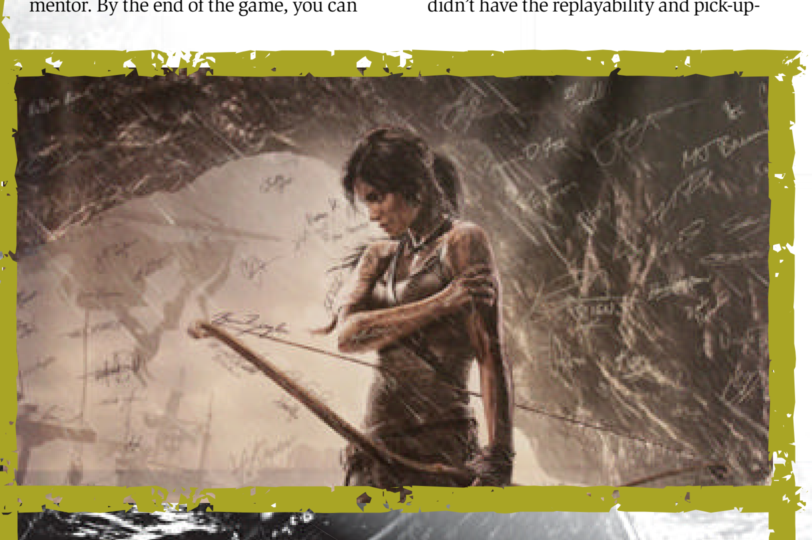
Yet, though the single-player impressed us with its coherence and unity of purpose, the main reason we're here at Crystal's San Francisco headquarters is to try *Tomb Raider*'s new multiplayer, which the team is keen to emphasise to us has never been done in a *Tomb Raider* game before. It's not complicated – an extension of the game's combat engine into a multiplayer environment because Crystal realised, after the co-op play from *Lara Croft And The Guardian Of Light*, that their engine could actually handle net code.

It also reveals quite how close the game has come to *Call Of Duty*. As we joke to the developers, we always thought *Tomb Raider* multiplayer would focus more on competitive tomb running, a la *Trials Evolution*, or sliding, rather than on grisly, gritty combat. "As much as we liked ideas that were redundant to the single-player," says Hughes, "they weren't rounding it out as much as I liked. If you are in a super-tense place that's building up atmosphere, then you just go to something lighter, it breaks that. Similarly, in *Guardian Of Light*, we proved co-op puzzle-solving, but it didn't have the replayability and pick-up-and-play investment. If you want puzzle-solving and immersion, the single-player offers that; if you want to quickly jump in with your friends, the current multiplayer experience rounds up this disc with complementary gameplay."

Perhaps this also reflects what we saw in *Hitman: Absolution* too, a focus on making the critical path – the part that the simplest gamer will take through a game – as familiar and easy as possible. Sadly, these days 'familiar' seems to consist of combat and 'easy' consists of allowing us to kill everyone we encounter. We won't pretend it doesn't detract, for us, from the core of Core's original *Tomb Raider*, but it's a viable, centrist path to take.

The multiplayer also doesn't integrate into the core story, though the team did consider this during development "You'd be playing as Lara in single-player, and you'd come across the survivors, and they'd be sent off, and that'd be your multiplayer mission," says Karl Stewart, global brand director at Crystal Dynamics. "On paper, that sounded great. But we had to shoehorn the single-player to make it fit, which was exactly what we said we wouldn't do. Very quickly, it got chopped." It also put additional boundaries onto the multiplayer. "Even though a map would be super-fun in a given area, we couldn't do it, because the multiplayer characters never ended up there." Says Hughes. "Instead we tied it more abstractly, in that fictional, mechanical way. The original concept was a diminishing return for our time, narratively."

Despite that, the multiplayer levels draw much from the single-player, mainly in terms of character and design. There are two sides: the survivors, drawn mainly from Lara's crew and the rare friendly humans she encounters on the island; and the scavengers, or Solarii, the thuggish followers of a leader we won't name, for spoiler reasons. It's notable that Lara doesn't



Multiplayer gameplay has a class-like system based on the character that the player chooses to fight as.

With four modes and five maps, expect a big DLC drop to follow shortly after the game's release.

feature as a playable character in the modes we saw. We suspect that this is both because it would her undermine her iconic status to have her corpse lying around and because she'd play very differently to her single-player state; the alterations that the team has made for multiplayer include increases to climbing speed and running speed, which might be noticeable if you were playing as Lara.

ach player does have the superhuman advantages of Lara power though – the survival vision, and stealth kill lethality. The sides are also deliberately asymmetric, each having a different upgrade tree and different starting weapon load-outs. Each player can carry one main weapon, one pistol and one launcher; and can save two loadouts for easy-swapping mid-match. The survivors start with the choice of a lethal shotgun, a solid assault rifle and a one-shot grenade launcher, whilst the scavengers get a bow, a spray-and-hope assault rifle, and an incendiary grenade.

Scattered around the levels are other, more powerful weapons; a minigun and a composite bow. We never get to use either of them, given that even the act of picking one up makes you a target immediately, but they're horribly effective at altering the level's psychological structure – the minigun for locking down areas of the map and the composite bow for making no-one spend any time out of cover.

In the single-player hands-on, the bow was our favourite weapon. Yet in the multiplayer we were so terrible with it that we never killed anyone; indeed, the one time we picked up the top-end composite bow, we were blown up immediately. In multiplayer, we found that the assault rifles were almost as good at range compared to the bows and that the stealth bonus from silent attacks wasn't as useful as the ability to fire immediately. That said, we're sure players will get expert with the bow rapidly, that the game dynamic will change hugely as you level up and that Crystal is planning to do some balancing on release. "You wouldn't pull out a (sniper) rifle and run and gun on the ground" says Stewart "You'd find a high area, somewhere sneaky, and pick people off. You use the bow in the same way. Each weapon has to change a little bit to enter multiplayer."

Survival Instinct is *Batman: Arkham Asylum*'s Detective Mode in all but name. Another feature that has quickly become a mainstay of the genre.

The verticality to maps in multiplayer should prove distinctive enough to separate it from the majority of its peers.

Like the single-player game, each weapon can be upgraded; however, in multiplayer each can only have two attachments at a time, slowly upgrading each weapon to fit better with your play style. Want your scavenger assault rifle to be a close-combat monster? One upgrade increases the fire rate, massively increasing the damage and reducing the accuracy, and a larger clip increases your ammo capacity. On the other hand, you can include a sight to increase the accuracy and a stability mod that does the same, so that you can snipe or hip-shoot more easily. You can save different configurations of each gun to the two different load-out slots, allowing for easy swapping mid-game.

Just like the single-player, to unlock upgrades, you need scrap. You get this from crates, from winning matches and from killing your enemies. There are also a huge range of in-match achievements that give you extra bonus scrap – some reward you for performing well, such as meleeing several enemies to death in a row; others compensate you for dying too much, so that the losers don't feel left out.

On top of that, new characters unlock as you go up the levels, based on the scrap you've acquired. For example, get to level 10 and the Survivor Grim, a wiry old man, is unlocked, alongside a new pistol. The survivors are purely cosmetic, but they give you a good idea about what level the player you're facing off against is. At the very high end are the game's end baddies and finally revealed heroes – but, given that seeing these has spoiled the story for us, we're not going to spoil it for you too.

Five maps are going to ship with *Tomb Raider* and there will be later DLC packs as well. Of the five, we played four, three of which are Team Deathmatch and one that was Cry For Help. The two other modes are called Rescue Me and Domination – but that's all we can say about those at the moment. "For us it's about quality not quantity – it was let's build five maps that feel very structured, that take the single-player into the multiplayer world, and four modes that feel familiar that we can build on with our themes. Take Domination, Team Deathmatch or Capture The Flag and make them our own," says Karl Stewart, global brand director at Crystal Dynamics.

Team Deathmatch is quite traditional. Up to eight players spawn at opposite sides of the map and the winning team is the first to reach 25 kills. As might be expected, it's chaotic and made more so by a few innovations. The first is the sheer verticality of the levels, in particular a cliff-side beach level; it's a sniper's paradise, even if that sniper only has a bow, with great drops (which are rarely fatal), a variety of paths up to the heights, and ziplines down (Players can also climb up ziplines, but it's painfully slow). In the upper middle of the level is a stand-mounted minigun – a tempting spot to camp, but easy to pick off with arrows. Through the middle of the level is a moving platform, like a cable car, that moves between the low and high spawn points.

The level also has the second innovation; traps. Like in the single-player, players can with a tap of the button pop up a lightning rod; any enemy player coming too near to it for too long is immediately fried by a bolt from the blue. Similarly, on a level based around a Japanese submarine base, snare traps allow players to hang their enemies upside down; like in the single-player, they can shoot the rope at their ankle to release themselves, but this means taking valuable time out from defending themselves...

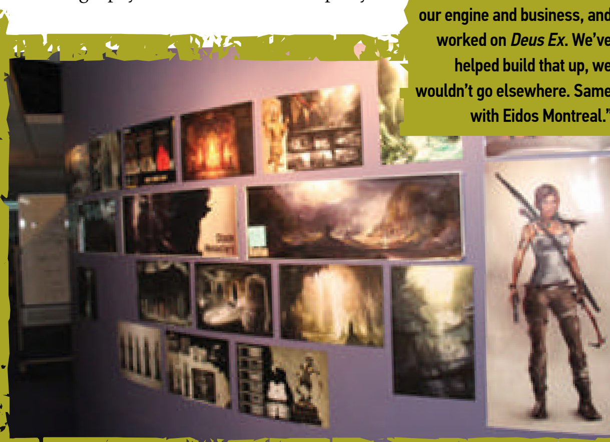
The submarine level also demonstrates neatly a final innovation; triggerable environmental threats. In the middle of the level is an ancient submarine, with two halves of a swing bridge on either side of it. If players manage to lower both of these, the entire area becomes lethally electrified.

The other mode is more neatly complex and asymmetric, set in a tower-dotted Scavenger camp. The survivors are attempting to grab health packs that are spawning randomly on the map and return them to another randomly-placed drop-off point – do this five times and they win. The survivors' big advantage is that they don't die immediately when they go down – instead, they get to fire off all their pistol ammo at any nearby targets before they get finished off and can be rezzed by a buddy, meaning it pays for them to work as a party.



Stewart on building on a single platform.

"We build everything directly on Xbox 360, so everyone in the studio is working on a game built on one platform, so we can keep focus, everyone's singing from the same hymn sheet. Externally, we bring in partners to take it to other platforms. You build on multiplatform, you spend two out of five days moving new stuff onto other platforms. Nixxes, who we've worked with for 15 years, from *Legacy Of Kain*, they've done every single game we've ever made, they understand our engine and business, and worked on *Deus Ex*. We've helped build that up, we wouldn't go elsewhere. Same with Eidos Montreal."





● A hero's birth is something not often seen in major franchises. If it works, expect it to kick-off a trend.

● We have been assured that Lara's titular raiding of tombs will feature heavily.

As much fun as we had with it, putting multiplayer into Tomb Raider is something of a gamble

The scavengers on the other hand are just trying to kill 25 survivors. They need to get close up to finish off the survivors but can't take down four when being pistol-punctured by themselves. For that reason, they have access to a sandstorm-summoning device. This totally destroys visibility for the survivors, even using Lara-vision they can only see a few feet – but the Scavengers can see the survivors through the storm, wherever they are.

As much fun as we had with it, putting multiplayer into *Tomb Raider* is something of a gamble. If it doesn't work with other players, it could well spoil the main storyline. If it does, on the other hand, they'll have to make a new multiplayer mode every time they make a game (as Naughty Dog learned through the evolution of the *Uncharted* series.) So why add it now? "There has to be that first time you do it." says Stewart. "It was clear to us from day one that it was something we should look at, but not as a necessity. The team here was focused on single-player and though we had this great concept, it went into a drawer. We only get one chance to do this; we have to be 100 per cent focused."

Thankfully, as development progressed, the team realised that the multiplayer did seem to make sense – and it so happened that the *Deus Ex* team up in Montreal had been working with the Crystal Engine for their game. "They're a very talented bunch of guys, we've known them for a long time, they have a lot of passion for *Tomb Raider*; it was a no-brainer." Indeed, Crystal and Montreal have swapped staff repeatedly, not to mention engines and creative ideas. "It's less an obligation than an opportunity" Hughes agrees. "With that opportunity, multiplayer is part of the *Tomb Raider* DNA. Whether we do it next time or not, we've started down that road. Playing with multiplayer is modernising from an opportunity space."

We could see from the team meeting boards while we were at Crystal that Lara was almost finished; the number of bugs shrank significantly during the day we were there. Crystal's team is already moving onto other projects, as can be seen from their office space; it's large and open-plan, so they literally move partition walls as people are absorbed by different projects. Roughly a third is devoted to an unannounced new project, though the team were understandably unforthcoming about what that might be.

Using modern technology, pop-culture references, and a character that's strong without being a simplified cardboard cut-out, this rebooted *Tomb Raider* is very much of its time. On the game side, it's ticked all the boxes we expect from a modern action game – gorgeous visuals, integrated themes, a strong linear plot and a critical path that anyone can play. Combining these makes it a good stab at being the best reboot of an iconic videogame character so far. Lara would certainly approve.


FATHER COMSTOCK
r Prophet
COME FLY AWAY
FIRST LADYS AERODOME



TROUBLE IN PARADISE

Irrational Games returns to the world of BioShock with a brand new instalment in the franchise, dropping the undersea world of Rapture in favour of a city in the clouds

"Even God deserves a do-over. What is Columbia but an arc for another time"
Father Comstock

IT'S BEEN A long time coming. As *BioShock* leaves the depths of Rapture for the very first time, Irrational Games is ready to unleash its mystery in the clouds. A world brimming with racism and violently executed religious ideals – welcome to Columbia, a New Eden for the 'worthy'. games™ went hands on with the first few hours of *BioShock Infinite*; has it been worth the wait?



There's an inescapable sense of déjà vu surrounding the opening moments of *BioShock Infinite*. A lighthouse on the horizon, an untamed storm swallowing the sky and the rage of the Atlantic Ocean under your feet, but a return to Rapture this is not. Where one journey began with descent towards a dystopian hell in a bathysphere, *Infinite* is more concerned with ascension.

Infinite is the third instalment in the *BioShock* franchise in six years, but only the second to bear the Irrational Games stamp. It is a small but integral detail. As any players who crawled through 2K Marin's wayward 2010 effort can confirm, the magic was missing the second time around. Whether it was the absence of Ken Levine's guiding vision, or the nuances of Rapture simply faded away with time remains to be seen. *Infinite* doesn't want you to forget its heritage, in fact it often hinges on it, but when Levine and his team at Irrational were presented with the opportunity to return for a straight-up *BioShock* sequel, they declined.

"When we started [development after *BioShock*], we actually worked on a different IP for several months," states creative director Levine, on the aptly named 'Project Icarus' as *Infinite* was known internally. "But it wasn't really right for us. We were stuck. We didn't have any ideas for another *BioShock* game. Going back to Rapture? We felt our studio had said everything we needed to say about that. So then we said, what could we do another BioShock game about, what could that be? First thing we worked out was how it can be different, rather than how can it be the same. Walking away from Rapture, all those characters and that aesthetic, that was tough," says Levine, adding, "[But] as much as I love it, Rapture really is a dungeon. It's a bunch of corridors. The water doesn't really exist outside of a piece of art outside of the windows. It's a trick, a beautiful trick."

"Going back to Rapture? We felt our studio had said everything we needed to say about that. So then we said, what could we do another BioShock game about, what could that be?"

Ken Levine, Irrational Games

Beautiful just about covers it; Rapture was an award-winning world. It was a place Irrational could show rather than tell, teeming with life and rich with detail. A world built on the pillars of objectivism and crushed under the weight of greed, addiction and power. We arrived when the city was rusting and buckling under the weight of the Atlantic Ocean.

In March, Irrational is ushering in a new utopia. Trading sea for sky, *Infinite* quickly introduces players to Columbia in 1912, a floating monument to American exceptionalism, a herald of America's ascension on the global stage; it's a beautiful sight to behold. A city above the clouds, suspended by blimps and balloons, it's entirely removed from Andrew Ryan's warped, and ultimately doomed, libertarianism experiment. Columbia is in its prime, disconnected from the world below, a literal kingdom of heaven for those willing to pledge discipleship to Father Comstock.

One who might not be so quick to pledge to the cause is Booker DeWitt, a private eye and disgraced ex-Pinkerton agent desperate to take the easy way out of his mounting problems. "He's a guy who has some gambling debt, and he's obviously made some mistakes in his life and he's in a bad place," states

POWER IN YOUR HANDS

As with the original BioShock, Booker is given a range of fantastical and otherworldly powers, this time called Vigors. Replacing BioShock's Plasmids, Vigors can be used to do everything from commanding murderous crows to possessing technology, to absorbing damage and unleashing a world of hurt on your would be attacker. In a sadistic twist, when you first use a Vigor you see the effect it has on your body, and honestly, we never needed to see flesh melting down to the bone in glorious HD. Irrational did it anyway. Salt, the replenishing resource behind the Vigors, is in short supply though, so the powers need to be used sparingly.

Booker finds Elizabeth in the city's Siphon monument – she is the 'specimen' that should not be approached.

Once freed from captivity by Booker, Elizabeth will aid him throughout the game with her special abilities and suggestions.

Levine, giving us an insight into the head we will be occupying over the course of the lengthy campaign. "There's a saying in writing: you always want to put the character in the last place on Earth that they want to be, and that's what this game does."

As Booker takes his first steps onto Columbia's boardwalk, the sense of wonder is breathtaking. You'd be hard pressed to see any reason as to why Columbia stands as his worst nightmare. The streets are alive with movement and conversation. Kids play under the shower of a burst fire hydrant, people are marvelling at the procession moving through the streets and every character around you is involved in a very real day-to-day activity.

Of course, the devil is in the detail and trouble never seems to be far off from paradise. Pay closer attention to the signs adorning the city streets and posters on the walls: they are ultra-nationalistic propaganda asserting Father Comstock's religious regime. The residents of Columbia are all suspiciously white, and audio diaries lead us to the discovery that Columbia was built as a respite from the 'unwanted'.

Religion, race and prejudice are the central themes and the underlying current to Columbia. Booker is quickly drawn into the very public lynching of a mixed-race couple, and later, run-ins with Ku Klux Klan charter members and suicide bombings – all in aid of Comstock's desire to rid the city of Booker – would dominate the encounters found in the latter half of our playthrough.



The Hall of Heroes area is home to various historical soldiers such as Chinese warriors from the Boxer Rebellion.

These subjects can be difficult to address, and videogames in particular tend to skirt around the big issues of life. This is a reality that Levine has approached not just from the few who have played *BioShock Infinite*, but from developers in his own studio as well.

"I'm an intense history buff, a culture buff, but I had to do a lot of thinking about religion. Getting to understand Comstock was tougher for me than anything with Andrew Ryan. I had to understand him to write him. I had to understand his motivation



Dropping in on an armoured warrior, Booker takes the opportunity to get up close and personal for some melee combat.

and his world view because I never had an ecstatic religious experience," considers Levine, understanding how delicate the subjects of religion and race are. "That's a transformative event for many people. It's not like they just let go and think about it, it just happens. That never happened to me.

"Something really helped make [Comstock] click for me. We actually had someone on the team who got to a part in the game, and they are very religious, got to this part in the game, put his controller down, opened up Microsoft Word and wrote a resignation letter. He was extremely offended by it," began Levine. "We had a conversation; we talked about what bothered him. It occurred to me that I hadn't really done a good enough job of explaining why anybody would follow Comstock in the first place. The racism is immediately a complicated matter, but people follow him. Very normal people follow some very dark individuals sometimes, but there's a reason for it. I really struggled figuring out the reason, [but] during that conversation the outlines of it really started to form for me," says Levine, adding, "It's not about making Comstock palatable or likeable, it's about making him understandable.

I said [to the offended team member], 'Look, I'm going to go do some writing. I'm going to show you what I did. I'm not going to ask for your approval, because honestly if you said "no I hate it", then that's too bad. I'm just gonna do what I do. But I think you're going to find this interesting, and I think I'm going to find it makes a better game.' "

The team member in question ended up staying, but Levine has had similar conversations with other members of his staff. Sex, drugs, and until recently rock 'n' roll, have been barely touched subjects in gaming, let alone religion and race. The slightest whiff of controversy tends to lead angry fanboys and soapbox media to the doorstep of developers hungry to expand the horizons of storytelling potential. For Levine, the time is now; he can't see any reason why he should back down from telling his story, no matter the potential implications. "I don't think anyone would sit down with writer X or film director Y and say 'oh is it okay to take on this theme?' We are our own worst enemy. The fact that it should be a question… why wouldn't we? Why shouldn't we? Games are still perceived by some as toys; it would be hard to have Adolf Hitler with a kung fu grip, you know that would be a little weird, right, because toys aren't that expressive. Well, games are incredibly expressive. Games are as fully featured, if not more fully featured, when it comes to expressive ideas than any other form of media," states Levine.

A LONELY WORLD

While Irrational was originally planning on including multiplayer modes in *Infinite*, one of the rumoured reasons the game was delayed from October 2012 to 2013, it is now missing from the face of the game. While Ken Levine was candid about its initial inclusion, level designer Shaun Elliot said the multiplayer looked promising. "I worked on it – a good deal too. If the results delivered something that we thought was going to be really unique and appropriate for the kind of game we were making, we were fully behind the idea if it got that far. But we never announced anything because we didn't know ourselves… But the important thing for me was that it's not like it was time that was just wasted, it was time that was productive and yielded unexpected benefits."

"I don't think anyone would sit down with writer X or film director Y and say 'oh is it okay to take on this theme?' "

Ken Levine, Irrational Games





BioShock Infinite is channelling a new lease on expressive gameplay. Where Jack – your hands in *BioShock 1* – was a mute, Booker is fully voiced. This is an integral factor in nailing the situation and motives of the character, not that Levine quite considered just how much work it would entail.

"In the beginning Booker and Elizabeth were mute, no joke, because we were so fucking terrified of what it meant. Let me tell you, my writing hand is very, very, very tired," Levine chuckled. "The boardwalk level I worked an early pass on was several times longer than the entire *BioShock 1* script. *Several times longer*." The mission in question only made up a small segment of our playthrough, but it was full of life and character – it quickly creates a sense of realism and validity to the setting. Columbia is full of hubs like this; a beach and adjacent promenade also convey similar emotions of sustainability to the world. If you want you can run straight through and get to the next bout of brutality, or you can stay and enjoy a slice of life. Every NPC has something to do and say, a place in the world. It's exhaustingly realised, it's a level of detail that we just haven't experienced in a videogame before.

How Booker found himself in this world is central to the narrative, and a point is hammered home early on: "find the girl, and wipe away the debt." The girl in question is Elizabeth, the mysterious prize Booker has been sent to reclaim. While the punishment for failing to complete this task wasn't made perfectly clear, a butchered lighthouse caretaker leads us to believe that whatever crowd Booker has fallen in with aren't big on second chances.

The game is reliant on you quickly forming a relationship with Elizabeth, a Rapunzel-like character under lock and key in the heart of the city. The banter between the characters helps establish this quickly and after a daring rescue, we get to witness her very first experiences outside of the confinement of four walls and tears in the fabric of reality. She loves the beautiful world of Columbia. She stops to smell every flower and enjoy every sight and sound, though she's genuinely taken aback by the darker side she soon discovers. She's confused by a 'Whites

BANK EXTERIOR MAP

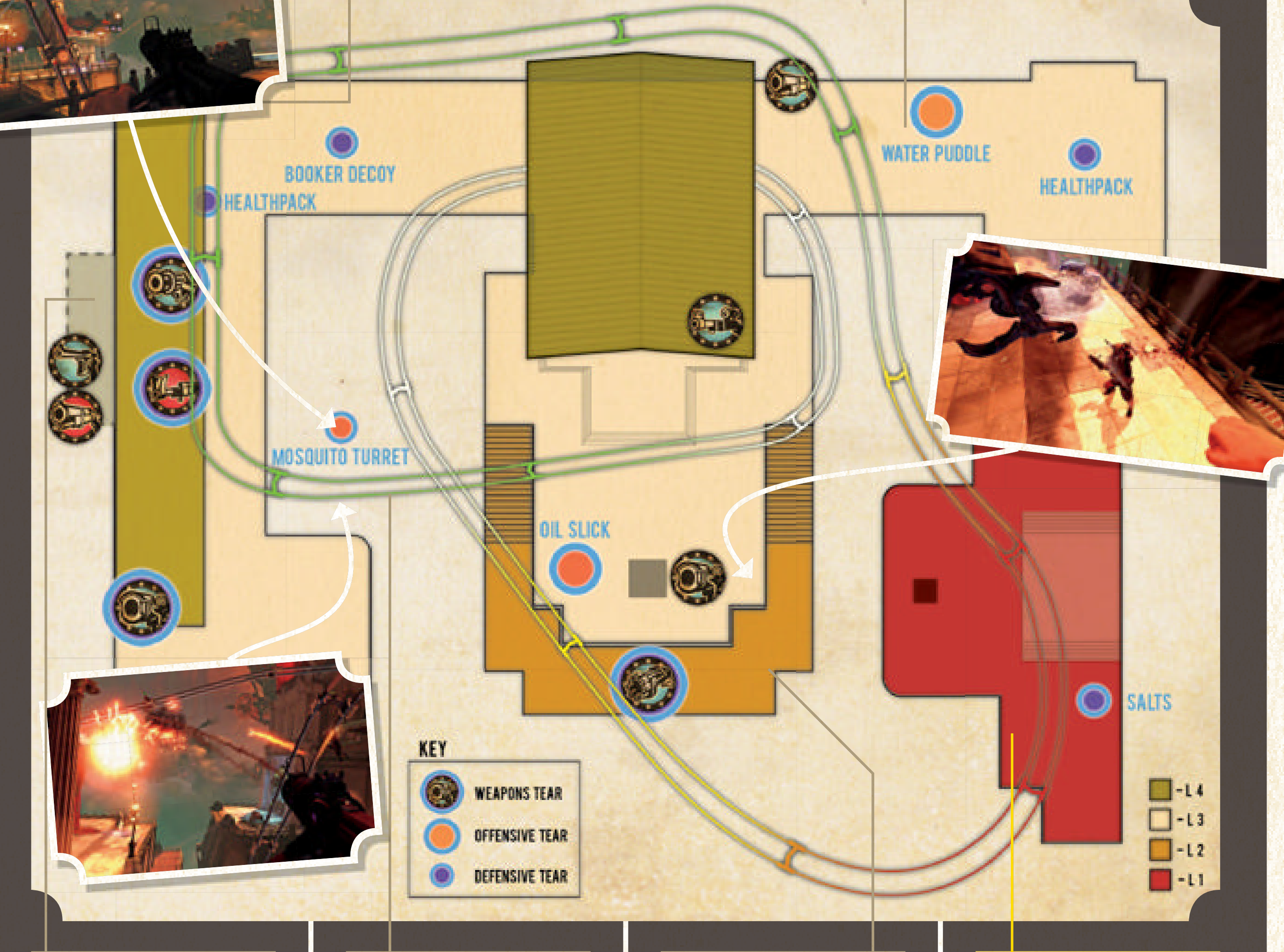
Irrational was kind enough to let games™ have a taste of a later level from *Infinite*. The Bank Exterior fight is tough, swarming with enemies and unrelenting in its pursuit to put you 40,000ft under. We also had access to a full range of Vigors and weapons, though we didn't quite know how to utilise them… nothing wrong with sticking to old favourites: fire and murderous crows that love to eat flesh.

MOSQUITO TURRET:

The fight gets really hectic and when the hulking mechanic enemies come into play, it can get pretty tough pretty quickly. Luckily Elizabeth can open up a tear in reality here and bring a floating MG turret into the world. It does a great job of churning out enemies across the verticality of the level.

BANK FRONT:

Much needed health packs are placed around the front doors of the bank, which you'll need because the fight quickly gets insanely tough. If the mechanical vice hands of death from the Handyman weren't enough, enemies and barges continue to swarm in through the level. Worst case scenario, you can always just hide here behind some cover while Elizabeth scouts the area to find supplies.



BALCONY:

When you're taking a fight to Sky-Lines and zipping around the area as quickly as possible, you might not think to climb the Sky-Lines higher to access this balcony, but the rewards are plentiful if you do. A few enemies can be brutalised, revealing lots of weapons, though the RPG does wonders.

SKY-LINES:

The Sky-Line combat is surprisingly fluid: you can quickly use them to get vantage points around the map or to get a few seconds away from the hordes of religious extremists. Though once the Handyman shows up, he has a tendency to electrocute the lines, stopping you in your tracks.

OIL SLICK:

When the enemies really start closing in on your position, Elizabeth can open a time tear here, creating the possibility for fiery death on all who oppose your right to breathe. Opening this tear does of course close the others, so you need to weigh the risk of closing down the floating turret or ammo reserves in favour of pyrotechnics.

START:

You start here on a platform overlooking the exterior of the bank. Barges come in from the left with automated turrets on board while enemies swarm in from the bank's front doors. If you're quick you can possess the turrets on the barge and turn them on the enemies before they bring the big guns into play.

KEEP IT IN-GAME

As we reach the end of the console cycle, and graphics being what they are, there is a tendency for developers to overuse cut-scenes to tell a story. Ken Levine, on the other hand, is eager to keep as much of *Infinite* in-game as possible, "Most people tend to use cut-scene spaces. My opinion is, no other media asks you to take your story here and your other experience here. I'd rather integrate those things 'cause I think it's a richer experience when you're not shifting gears all the time. Then you have moments when you're thinking you're in this nice little character moment and combat just gets thrust into it. It surprises you."

Only' bathroom the duo stumble upon in a Zeppelin station, and she's horrified by the notion of violence. It's quite the accomplishment for the Irrational team, who were admittedly worried it wouldn't work.

"We knew she would be the heart of the game – she's carrying a lot on her little virtual shoulders," says Levine hesitantly, eager to assure players that they never want the game to feel like an escort mission. "A lot of the time in the public, people would say, 'she should have a gun'. [My response is] if she's going to kill three enemies in a battle, why not just have three fewer enemies in the battle? If you just need something for them to do, think of something else because the player is perfectly capable of doing the shooting. That's why we started working on all of these activities for her to do. Not only because they were cool but because they reflected her personality. They help tell her story. She's this little nerdy girl who's been trapped in a tower. She developed all these interests and all those interests get reflected in the things she does for you."

Lock picking, code reading and item scrounging are just a handful of the things Elizabeth will do for you throughout your time in Columbia. Vitally, if you're running low on Salts or ammunition in the middle of a fight, she will scour the surrounding area for any items that might be of use. It's a helpful feature and one that keeps the game constantly moving, a godsend considering that the pace of combat has been greatly quickened.

The aforementioned tears in time and reality, unsurprisingly, play a huge role in many of the mysteries found through *Infinite*. She has the ability to manipulate the fabric of reality around her, opening up tears that she can use to bring objects, items and gateways to new worlds out of existence.

The play we had with *Infinite* has our head spinning with potential story avenues, but it seems likely that time, or the manipulation of it, will be the crux of Columbia's secrets. We briefly see Elizabeth tear a hole 60 years into the future to the French premiere of 'The Revenge of the Jedi'. Elsewhere a barbershop quartet harmonise a rendition of the Beach Boys' 1966 song 'God Only Knows' and later, on a beach, a period rendition of Cyndi Lauper's 1979 track 'Girls Just Want To Have Fun' can be heard. These certainly aren't by mistake, but by design, and the game will certainly only offer more of these tantalising mysteries as we progress through Columbia.

Who is Zachary Comstock? Why are we really on Columbia, and what is that strange 'AD' branding on Booker's hand identifying him as the False Prophet? Things aren't what they seem, but Levine certainly isn't going to tell us anything, offering simply, "Obviously there is a connection there, part

Columbia is full of patriotic flags and banners, but scratch beneath the veneer and you'll find a more disturbing nationalism.



The Hall of Heroes history museum is the setting for some hectic combat – here Booker uses the explosive 'Devil's Kiss' Vigor.



Columbia's Sky-Line system is a handy mode of transport – Booker can use his Sky-Hook to latch onto it to travel quickly to another place.

of the interest in the story is seeing where that goes." So many questions, no time for answers.

Of course, the trouble-in-paradise motif also extends out of Columbia and into development itself. Irrational has been struck by multiple delays, high-profile personnel changes late into development, rumours of cut multiplayer modes and, thanks to an E3 demo, fan expectation raised to near unobtainable levels. Thankfully, Levine is aware of the hype. It's because of this hype that *BioShock Infinite* went quiet for almost a year, skipping last year's E3 entirely to focus on polishing the final product. Though Levine is quick to assure us that all is right in the world at Irrational.

"Of the guys who worked on *BioShock Infinite* and *BioShock 1*, we only lost one person," says Levine, explaining the departure of art director Nate Wells to Naughty Dog in August of last year. "We went through a similar process on *BioShock 1*; he was originally the art director on *BioShock 1* and then Scott [Sinclair] became art director because various things happened. The same happened here.

"Nate said he had to go do this thing, and I said 'Go, God bless'. And I turned to Scott and I said, 'Guess what kid!' " Levine smiles, adding, "I never begrudge people leaving. It's not a prison camp. Only thing that matters is making a game that people like and are excited about. At the end of the day, words mean nothing, the game means everything.

"I never begrudge people leaving. It's not a prison camp. Only thing that matters is making a game that people like and are excited about. At the end of the day, words mean nothing, the game means everything."

Ken Levine, Irrational Games

"I try to not set expectations for myself… There is this cycle of concern that will build up. For example when we first showed the game there was a lot of concern that 'Oh my God, it's not really a *BioShock* game, they just threw the name on there 'cause marketing forced them to. Then it's, 'Oh my God, that E3 demo is a hack and they will never be able to replicate that.' Then it's like, 'The game's in trouble and everyone's leaving', and then," he finally sighs, "it's like, 'The cover's bad!' – he lets out with a smile. Levine is aware that people will always worry about something they are passionate about; he's been in the game long enough to not let it get to him. He's focused on the end product, because really that's all that matters.

"People are passionate about *BioShock* and it's not about *BioShock* 2011 or *BioShock* 2012, they're passionate about something that feels very fresh but very different at the same time," comments Levine. "Really, you get to the point where you realise there is always something people will worry about. They're worried because they care, I've worked on enough games where nobody cared, that I'll take the worry. I know that tomorrow, I know that no matter what I show, it will cause people to worry because they care. It's all part of the job."

Fans are rightfully concerned that *Infinite* is *BioShock* in name and not heart, but getting hands-on you quickly realise that the series isn't defined by its place but its feel. It has a set of rules that can be applied anywhere else, and this time around Irrational has built an expansive, breathing world that we simply can't wait to explore further come March.

THE NEXT WAVE OF HARDWARE INNOVATIONS HAS SPARKED AN UNENDING TORRENT OF SPECULATION SURROUNDING THE FUTURE OF THE INDUSTRY, BUT IT'S THE SOFTWARE DEVELOPERS WHO HAVE GIVEN CONSUMERS THE FIRST GLIMPSE AT WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THE NEXT GENERATION OF GAMING. INVESTIGATING THE ENGINES THAT WILL MAKE IT ALL HAPPEN, GAMES™ PULLS BACK THE CURTAIN ON THE NEXT GEN

Building The Next Generation

IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME UNTIL SONY AND MICROSOFT COMMENCE THE GRAND UNVEILING OF THE NEXT GENERATION OF CONSOLE HARDWARE, AN EVENT THAT HAS BEEN AN UNFATHOMABLE SEVEN YEARS IN THE MAKING. It's merely a matter of when and, predictably, those in the know are unwilling to tell us just yet, but what we do know is that software developers have been busy. The last six months alone have borne witness to a steady trickle of information making its way down from those who have spent the interim period between hardware iterations lost within complex algorithms, lifelike physics, light diffusion and a swathe of other compulsory components that constitute the modern game engine.

Without doubt the most prolific studio to demonstrate its technological advancements to date has been Epic. The *Gears Of War* developer insists that its Unreal 3 game engine's capabilities demand processing power ten times more powerful than what currently exists in the console marketplace. You only need watch a few frames of the 153-second 'Elemental' demo released back in June to grasp the astronomical growth that this offers the industry, both in terms of the production process and the entertainment. Likewise, other industrious technicians and engineers unseen behind the corporate sting have been keen to cause a stir, not just offering a glimpse at the ways in which the technology will further evolve the industry, but what it means for some of the most beloved gaming franchises of recent times. Without any further ado, **games™** takes a sharpened glance at the most promising game engines currently in development.



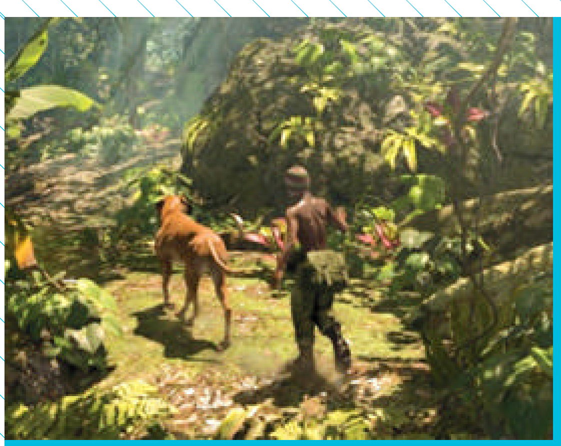
■ Released last June, Epic's astonishing 'Elemental' demo showcased the quality of visuals possible using its Unreal Engine 4.

UNREAL ENGINE 4

DEVELOPER: EPIC GAMES

■ **THE SHEER VOLUME OF TITLES THAT HAVE USED UNREAL ENGINE 3 OVER THE YEARS IS STAGGERING.** Down to a congruent mix of versatility, high-quality production values and ease of use, the development tool has earned wide acclaim from developers and consumers alike. Despite the presence of Unreal Engine 4, there's little doubt that Unreal Engine 3 will continue to be the prevalent resource across the industry – *Star Wars 1313* is one such mooted next-gen licence operating on the engine – but the advancements offered to developers ensure that it won't be long until the fourth iteration will soon pick up the mantle. June's 'Elemental' demo showcased the visual embellishments: polydynamic lighting, mass particle effects and complex reflections establish a close parity to high-end computer-generated effects found in film.

Epic has also ensured that the whole development process has been streamlined extensively in Unreal Engine 4. While we'll avoid indulging technological terminology, the bare facts are nonetheless impressive enough to translate to the layman. Updates can be made directly in-game without ever pausing gameplay; instant game preview enables the developer to spawn a player into the game without having to save the file first; and perhaps the biggest revelation is Kismet, the visual scripting tool that strips away much of the rigmarole of programming, transforming lines of code into a series of pull-down menus that control the behaviour of nearly every in-game object. What's more, if the original *Gears Of War* was the first software to showcase the potential of Unreal Engine 3, can we expect a similar debut of its successor's prowess with the next instalment of the meat-headed third-person shooter? We know that Epic develops its engine concurrently with an internal project, so perhaps we're looking at the return of Marcus Fenix to shepherd the arrival of the new engine.



FOX ENGINE

DEVELOPER: KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS

■ **HIDEO KOJIMA IS NOTHING IF NOT A TEASE, OFFERING SLIGHT GLIMPSES OVER THE PAST YEAR AT THE ENGINE THAT WILL POWER THE FUTURE OF THE *METAL GEAR* FRANCHISE.** Unveiling the Fox Engine back in 2011, Kojima designed it both for cross-platform development and to streamline the production time of internal projects. While technical details haven't been openly disclosed, there have been several key demonstrations of its power in the many months since its initial announcement. The majority of these presentations to date have hinged on startlingly lifelike textures and environments, replicating the dense vegetation of a vibrant forest scene and a mundane office interior to almost imperceptible perfection.

It's easier to apply the former to Fox's current slate of upcoming games, as we're well aware that there is at least one *Metal Gear* game on Kojima's slate in *Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes*. But the thinly veiled *Metal Gear Solid V* announcement at this year's VGAs suggests that the fully fledged sequel to *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots* is in the works, leading many to speculate that it will be an early next-generation console release, while *Ground Zeroes* will arrive at the tail-end of this interminable console cycle. Whether or not such hearsay amounts to fact is almost beside the point at this stage; we know that Kojima is using the Fox Engine to break new ground with the franchise, whether through the open-world setting of *Ground Zeroes* or the intense graphical bluster of the next numerical instalment.



■ In the *MGS: Ground Zeroes* demo, the Fox Engine delivers some very impressive weather effects as Snake breaks into a rain-drenched base.



Created using an all-new game engine, this *Watch Dogs* demo stunned those attending Ubisoft's 2012 E3 press conference.

UNTITLED UBISOFT ENGINE

DEVELOPER: UBISOFT

UBISOFT IS QUICKLY BECOMING ONE OF THE MOST FORWARD-THINKING DEVELOPERS OPERATING IN THE INDUSTRY TODAY. The last year alone has seen the number of internal staff swell, the studio leading third-party support on Nintendo's Wii U and putting into motion several behind-the-scenes technological innovations that will see the publisher's internal development teams transition from one console cycle through to the next. Aside from *Assassin's Creed III*'s AnvilNext – clearly designed for cross-platform purpose – last year's E3 debut of *Watch Dogs* was confirmed to be running on an all-new engine designed for the sci-fi noir tale.

While little has been said about what the engine offers the development process, what we do know is that it will allow Ubisoft's Montreal studio to efficiently optimise *Watch Dogs* for multiple platforms, enabling it to build a vivid replica of its chosen turf, Chicago, and embellish it with all the emerging technology expected in the near future. While it's unlikely that the engine will be used commonly among internal projects (we can't imagine *Assassin's Creed* shifting to a new engine at this stage), it's certainly indicative of Ubisoft's commitment to delivering unique gaming experiences, one that can only be achieved through advancing the publisher's own toolset to match its creative aspirations.



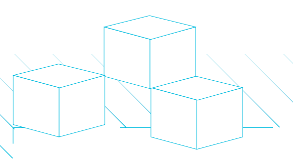
The *Final Fantasy* 'Agni's Philosophy' technical demo showcases the power of Square Enix's brand new Luminous Engine.

LUMINOUS ENGINE

DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX

SQUARE ENIX HAS REMAINED RELATIVELY QUIET SINCE RELEASING ITS LUMINOUS ENGINE FOOTAGE BACK AT E3 2012 – THE REAL-TIME *FINAL FANTASY* 'AGNI'S PHILOSOPHY' DEMO. It was a breathtaking display of the engine's raw power, lingering on the detail of various characters with hair molecules, bulging ligaments and expressive facial movements complimenting the unending barrage of eye-candy. It evoked the overwhelming spectacle that was once synonymous with the *Final Fantasy* series' inimitable cut-scenes, but now a seemingly possible feat within in-game action.

Aside from the advantages it offers aesthetically to Square Enix's core franchise are the creative benefits it offers the publisher's internal teams. Using the Agni's Philosophy demo from E3, the Luminous Engine's breakneck rendering capabilities enable developers to alter parameters and view the results in real-time. Pausing on any moment within the demo, alterations can be made to lighting, hair length and the volume of objects on the screen that can then be immediately evaluated back in the cinematic within seconds of making the changes. Currently Square Enix is still busying itself putting the finishing touches to the engine, but by all accounts it's a confident step by the Tokyo-based developer to re-establish itself at the forefront of the visual side of the medium.



QUANTIC DREAM'S IN-HOUSE ENGINE

DEVELOPER: QUANTIC DREAM

DAVID CAGE HAS BEEN VOCAL IN HIS DESIRE TO TRANSCEND THE ARTISTIC CONSTRAINTS OF HIS MEDIUM, STRIVING TO EMULATE THE STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES OF THE SILVER SCREEN THAT EVOLVED THROUGH DECADES OF FILMMAKING IN THE CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED *HEAVY RAIN* AND THE UPCOMING ELLEN PAGE-STARRING *BEYOND: TWO SOULS*. Moving another step closer to realising that ambition, the aspiring auteur has been busy in Paris building his unnamed engine with its main purpose to better capture the performances of real-life actors and transpose that performance into games.

Last year the director released a tech demo running on PlayStation 3 titled 'Kara' – a short film created in real-time on an early build of the engine. Since then the capabilities of the engine have magnified dramatically, which should, in theory, make uncanny valley a distant memory. *Beyond: Two Souls* will utilise much of Cage's work on the engine to better replicate the central performance of Page. What we've seen to date is close to photorealistic textures and detail, but the acting behind it is without doubt the most emotive that Cage has managed to produce through his combination of talent and technology. When Quantic Dream inevitably makes the shift to a next-gen project, Cage may finally find himself in the position to fully express his true artistic vision for the medium.



The *Beyond: Two Souls* demo shows what Quantic Dream can achieve with its in-house game engine and new motion-capture facility.

THE BEST OF THE REST



WARHORSE STUDIOS' UNNAMED ENGINE

DEVELOPER: WARHORSE STUDIOS

THE OBSCURE CZECH studio composed of ex-*Mafia* and *Operation Flashpoint* developers recently revealed an impressive tech demo of its in-house engine, churning out impressive medieval vistas that will play some part in the company's top-secret unannounced triple-A game.



SOURCE ENGINE 2

DEVELOPER: VALVE CORPORATION

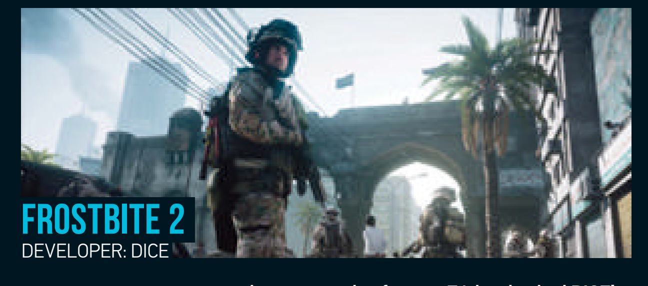
GABE NEWELL RECENTLY confirmed that Valve is not only working on its own games hardware system, but also that the developer is well underway on developing a follow-up to its internal Source Engine. Given the innovations the original made with realistic physics, expect the studio to produce a new engine that is nothing short of revolutionary.



AVALANCHE ENGINE 2

DEVELOPER: AVALANCHE STUDIOS

THE *JUST CAUSE* developer was one of the first studios to confirm it was working on next-gen software, while suggesting its future projects will be running off the successor to its Avalanche Engine. Considering the scope of *Just Cause 2*, the next iteration should dwarf its open-world rivals.



FROSTBITE 2

DEVELOPER: DICE

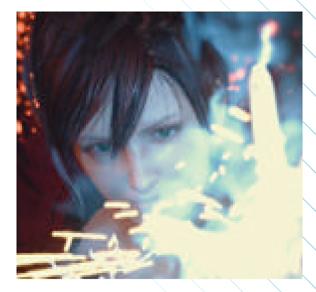
HEAVILY UTILISED OVER the past couple of years, EA has backed DICE's prominent Frostbite 2 engine by implementing it into most of its core franchises. Given that *Battlefield 3* on PC was unrivalled in the graphics department, we're expecting wonders from DICE as we enter the next gen.

THE GAMES

RUMOUR: FINAL FANTASY

PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE

WHILE THE AGNI'S Philosophy demo was exactly that – a demo – it does suggest that Square Enix is currently circling the opportunities that its new engine will offer the future of the franchise. Nothing has been announced yet, but given the stunning spectacle on display in the tech demo, there's little doubt that Square Enix will be quick to prove the power of its Luminous Engine with its most sacrosanct of franchises.





CONFIRMED: WATCH DOGS

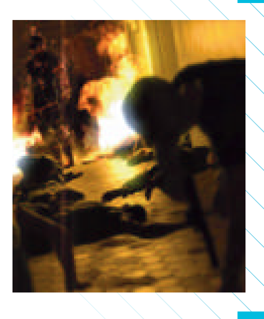
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE

UBISOFT'S OPEN-WORLD hack-and-stab future noir is set to be one of the first next-gen titles to arrive when Microsoft and Sony roll out their new hardware. It's without a doubt one of the most promising new properties on the horizon, with innovative emergent features and a tantalising multiplayer component that the studio has only hinted at to date. It's likely to be a cross-platform release, so don't expect it to push any boundaries quite yet.

RUMOUR: METAL GEAR SOLID V

PUBLISHER: KONAMI **DEVELOPER:** KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS

WELL, THIS HASN'T been confirmed yet, but we've little doubt that *The Phantom Pain* that debuted at the VGAs at the tail-end of 2012 is the next numerical entry in the *Metal Gear* franchise. Kojima has previously stated that the advancements made with the Fox Engine can only be afforded if the developer is to utilise it for the next entry in the convoluted saga of Snake and chums. Don't expect this to arrive until 2014 at the earliest.



CONFIRMED: STAR WARS 1313

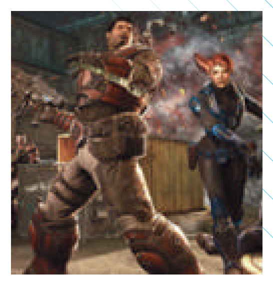
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION **DEVELOPER:** LUCASARTS

THE INTERNET IS aflame with *Star Wars* rumours and gossip since the third trilogy was announced, but let's not forget that LucasArt's moody action-adventure game is currently in the works and set to take the franchise into a more adult territory. Where this game will really explore the possibilities of advanced hardware is in the collaboration between the development team and Lucasfilm in-house studios ILM and Skywalker Sound, who have collaborated to ensure that the game delivers on the cinematic merits of its silver-screen counterpart.

RUMOUR: GEARS OF WAR 4

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT **DEVELOPER:** EPIC GAMES

WE'D BE SURPRISED if Epic wasn't busy beavering away on another main entry in the *Gears* franchise to coincide with the launch of the next Xbox. For many the current console generation didn't kick-off until Marcus Fenix arrived on the scene and it's to that end that Microsoft will most likely be eyeing up the bulging dude-bros to commence the next cycle of its own hardware. Although where the series goes after the end of *GOW3* is anyone's guess.





HOW TO BUILD A NEXT-GEN CONSOLE

USING REPORTED HARDWARE SPECIFICATIONS FOR THE NEXT XBOX AND PLAYSTATION ITERATIONS, GAMES™ COMPILES A PC SETUP TO RIVAL THE NEXT CONSOLE GENERATION

FIVE YEARS AGO, a lot of incredibly short-sighted people were sounding the death knell for PC gaming. The seventh generation of consoles opened the floodgates to mainstream gaming as the Big Three clamoured to sweep the best franchises for their own, which apparently left PC gamers with overpriced digital word processors. They winced as *Grand Theft Auto*, *Medal Of Honor*, *Command & Conquer* and *The Elder Scrolls* were muscled in on by the console manufacturers, then busied themselves with the likes of *Total War*, *Warhammer 40K*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and a plethora of indie games. And waited.

Now we're near the end of the current console generation, the landscape has changed predictably. Developers are squeezing the best out of console hardware, but the inevitable march of component technology has given the PC a huge technological lead. But with Sony and Microsoft still playing for hardware bragging rights, the playing field might be levelled again come generation eight. It will cost anything in the region of two or three times the price of a new PS4 or Xbox 720 for system builders to match the specifications of the new consoles in a PC, but what kind of machine would we be looking at exactly?

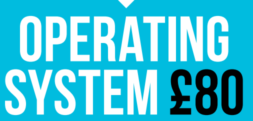
OPTICAL DRIVE £50

■ PC GAMERS don't even look at Blu-ray drives, especially as they cost around three times the price of a good-quality DVD drive while disc media are becoming less relevant than ever. Still, if we're going to compete with the consoles (or Sony, anyway), then this OEM LiteOn Blu-ray reader and DVD-burner will do the job.



GPU £170

■ THE USUAL toss-up between Nvidia and AMD graphics cards has favoured Nvidia's GeForce GTX 660 OC. It's currently a gamer's favourite and noses ahead of the 800MHz PS4 GPU (on paper, at least) with a 1033MHz core and 2GB of dedicated VRAM. It is, of course, compatible with Nvidia 3D Vision technology, too.



OPERATING SYSTEM £80

■ IT'S WINDOWS 8… it's got to be Windows 8, right? Well, it has touch-screen support (if you've got a touch-screen monitor), has a more console-like tabbed interface and Windows 7 isn't getting the nominal Direct X 11.1 update. For the sake of being more like a console, we're getting Windows 8 for this PC, even though there's little argument for PC gamers to upgrade.

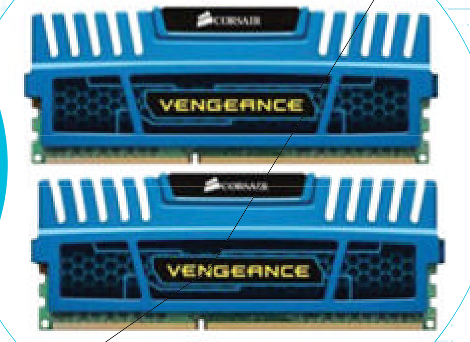


HARD DRIVE £65

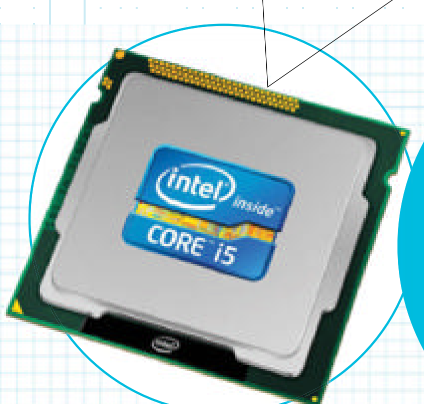
■ ODDLY, THIS is the area in which the PC really tends to pull away from console: PC has been sporting terabyte hard drives and fast solid state drives that dwarf the capacities and speeds of potential next-gen hardware for several years. A 500GB Seagate hybrid will serve our purposes here: it's a combi drive that uses the speed of the SSD and the bang per buck of the HDD.

RAM £35

■ THE XBOX 720 and the PS4 will likely settle on around 4GB of system memory. For PC with its operating system and application overheads, that's not quite enough for a gaming rig even today. 8GB of 1600MHz Corsair DDR3 memory should allow our machine to be a more competitive beast.







CPU £160

■ WITH COMPETITIVE commercial processors from AMD and the 28nm Steamroller core still in the pipeline, it leaves us with no choice but to go for an Intel processor to match the quad-core power of the new Sony console and leave the PowerPC CPU of the Xbox 720 for dust. A 3.3GHz i5 2500K strikes a good balance between price and power.

TOTAL: £560

■ WE'RE MISSING SEVERAL basic components from this list that don't really compare with consoles: the chassis, motherboard, power supply and who knows what else that will turn up in the next-gen consoles. It'll bring that build price up to around £800 – not including the price of a monitor. Also, console operating systems and the applications supported by them are fine-tuned to a specific hardware configuration and their games go through many levels of quality assurance testing before they're green-lighted. It makes comparing PC to console difficult at any stage in a generation's lifetime, but if there's any point at which console can commandeer the limelight, it's in the first year or so of launch.



INDIE UPRISING

WHILE THE UPSWELL IN POPULARITY HAS BEEN ONGOING FOR YEARS NOW, IT WAS 2012 THAT REALLY HIT HOME AS THE YEAR OF THE INDIES. IT WAS THE YEAR THAT DEVELOPERS MAKING THE GAMES THEY WANT FOR AN AUDIENCE THEY DECIDED ON WERE EVERYWHERE, GARNERING MAINSTREAM ATTENTION AND HUGE POPULARITY. BUT WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR INDEPENDENT DEVELOPMENT? AND HOW ARE THE BIG BOYS REACTING TO THE PLUCKY INDIE UNDERDOGS? GAMES™ SPOKE TO A FEW PROMINENT VOICES TO FIND OUT JUST WHAT THE INDIE UPRISING MEANS FOR THE INDUSTRY AS A WHOLE...

"The moves the likes of XBLA and PSN have made this gen have been outstanding" – Dan Marshall

DAN MARSHALL

COMPANY: Size Five Games
NOTABLE RELEASES: Ben There, Dan That / Time Gentlemen, Please! / Privates

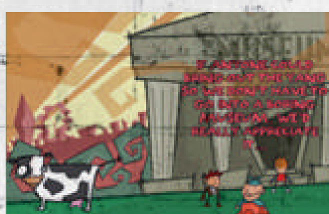


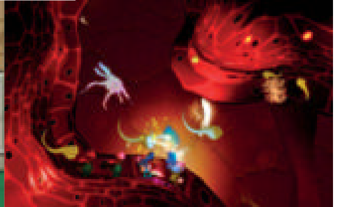
ARE INDIE GAMES A BUBBLE WAITING TO BURST? "There's [been] a total shift in how games are made; since the internet erupted and people are happy with the idea of downloading games instead of buying them in shops, there's scope for every size and shape of game."

WILL INDIES AND TRIPLE-A KILL OFF THE MIDDLE? "Through Kickstarter, Alpha Funding and whatever the next Big Thing is, we're now seeing mid-budget games coming onto the scene. I can't see why that would change."

WILL CONSOLE PLATFORM HOLDERS BE MORE OPEN TO INDIES IN FUTURE? "Nintendo are still very closed-off with the Wii U I notice, in that they still have some pretty tough stipulations, but the moves the likes of XBLA and PSN have made this gen have been outstanding. I think Steam has led the way, and I'd be really keen to see consoles follow suit with their next-gen machines. Frankly, they'd be mad not to."

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE? "At the moment I'm hard at work on a trendy stealth-action platformer called The Swindle. It's a steampunk breaking-and-entering simulator that plays kind of like a cross between *Sonic The Hedgehog* and *Deus Ex*. It's coming along really nicely, I'm hoping to show it off soon."





RICHARD PERRIN

COMPANY: Locked Door Puzzle
NOTABLE RELEASES: Kairo / The White Chamber

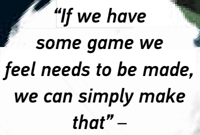


WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT BEING INDIE? "As an indie I can work on whatever I like whenever I want. Right now I've just finished a long-term project and am prototyping all sorts of weird ideas for things I'd like to try next. It's a great feeling of freedom."

AND WHAT'S BAD ABOUT IT? "Most commercial indie developers have to devote a lot of time to marketing and PR. Some people really get into it, but to me it's a huge time sink that detracts from the time I can spend on actually making things. I also get a sense that the people who are the most shameless about it are the most successful."

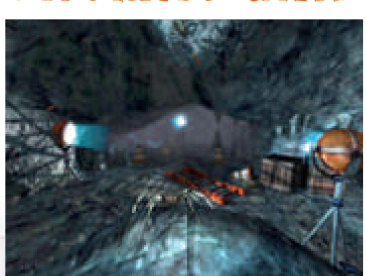
ARE INDIE GAMES A BUBBLE WAITING TO BURST? "The situation right now feels like a bubble to me, because there's just too many people setting up their dream projects expecting the level of success of *Braid* or *Super Meat Boy*. Only a handful of games are going to become big indie hits and there's going to be a lot of very disillusioned people in the next few years."

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE? "[A] game called *Journal* I'm working on with an artist in early stage of production that hopefully people will be hearing more about soon."



"If we have some game we feel needs to be made, we can simply make that" – Thomas Grip

THOMAS GRIP



COMPANY: Frictional Games
NOTABLE RELEASES: Penumbra series / Amnesia: The Dark Descent



WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT BEING INDIE? "There is nobody to dictate that what needs to be done, how we should work, what market we need to appease etc. If we have some game we feel needs to be made, we can simply make that."

WILL CONSOLE PLATFORM HOLDERS BE MORE OPEN TO INDIES IN FUTURE? " Depends a bit on what you mean by open. Open as in anyone can add the ? Yes, there will be ly be less restrictions. Open as in c ems? Unfortunately, with the success of Apple and their closed structure we are bound to see more of that."

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT INDIES? "I think there is still a sort of thinking that indies are all about retro/puzzle/platform games. But for every day that goes by, I think this view is proven wrong over and over again. Since the 'indie revolution' has started, there has been so much interesting stuff created. Now that these developers are gaining more experience and better finances, I think we will see more truly amazing stuff released over the coming years."

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE? " We have a project going on now that might actually be way too ambitious. This is a bit scary, but also really exciting."

"We've recently distilled what we do into just two words: Luxury Fun" – James Marsden

JAMES MARSDEN

COMPANY: Futurlab
NOTABLE RELEASES: Velocity / Beats Slider / Coconut Dodge



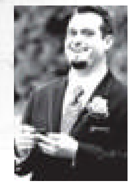
WILL CONSOLE PLATFORM HOLDERS BE MORE OPEN TO INDIES IN FUTURE? "I see it happening in a big way with Sony. I'm not so sure about Ninty or MS. Some of the coolest indie game studios still had to partner with established publishers to get their games onto XBLA, which isn't the way it should be."

ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT THE WINDOWS 8 'WALLED GARDEN' APPROACH? "I like walled gardens. We talk about the democratisation of game development being a great thing, and to some extent it is – shaking up the fat cats every few years is a good thing – but people who want to earn a living for being great at what they do should be seeking at least a few paving slabs around their garden! Without walls, you need a staggering amount of financial resources and/or luck to be successful, and I'm not convinced that is particularly good for the industry in terms of creative expression over the longer term."

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE? "We've recently distilled what we do into just two words: Luxury Fun, which refers to the fact we care a great deal about refining and polishing the experience of fun, the spark that happens between the player and the game, to a fine art. We'd like to continue creating luxury fun!"

CHARLES RANDALL

Y: Capybara Games
NOTABLE RELEASES: Critter Crunch / Might & Magic: Clash Of Heroes / Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP



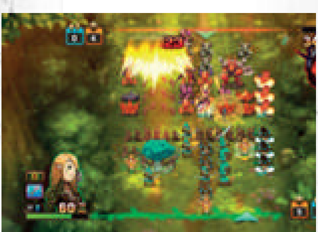
ARE INDIE GAMES A BUBBLE WAITING TO BURST? "The bubble that's about to burst is AAA development. I left [it] to go indie because $100m+ games are not sustainable, and that's where AAA budgets are headed. Conversely, a game built by a small team to sell a small number of copies and still break even is a business model that has always stood the test of time."

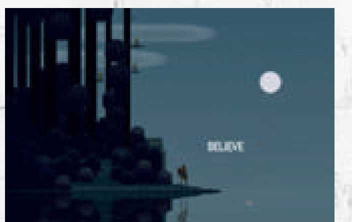
WILL INDIES AND TRIPLE-A KILL OFF THE MIDDLE? "I think small independent development is where gaming is going. I think gamers are getting tired of playing another game from the same franchise every year, and smaller lower-budget games are giving deeper and longer and more interesting play experiences."

WILL CONSOLE PLATFORM HOLDERS BE MORE OPEN TO INDIES IN FUTURE? "I highly doubt it. An open platform means there's less ways to force a consumer to pick yours over theirs."

ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT THE WINDOWS 8 'WALLED GARDEN' APPROACH TO DISTRIBUTION? "Yes, absolutely. The restrictions on these app stores are ridiculous and draconian when it comes to game developers. Take for example some of the games that get refused from the Apple App Store… This kind of rejection has no place in an open market and the problem is that these walled gardens are built to be the only source for new software for consumers."

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE? "Why, continuing to make great games, of course."







BILL STIERNBERG

COMPANY: Zeboyd Games
NOTABLE RELEASES: Breath Of Death VII: The Beginning / Cthulhu Saves The World / Penny Arcade Adventures: On The Rain-Slick Precipice Of Darkness: Episode 3



WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT BEING INDIE? With a publisher, you're often under NDAs or told not to speak directly and openly about your game, to let marketing handle the message. With indie development, there's no real barrier there – it's you, making the game, and the public."

WILL INDIES AND TRIPLE-A KILL OFF THE MIDDLE? "Thanks to the power of the recent console generation and the attitudes of publishers, most of the big companies want to rely on fewer, bigger-budgeted AAA games and little else. It's risky and it's the reason a lot of midsize companies and publishers have gone out of business this generation. [At] the other end of the spectrum you have the tiny indie teams releasing games through digital distribution, and many of them doing quite well… We do see a lot of former dev teams going the 'mobile independent studio' route… My only concern is that there seems to be a tremendous focus on 'mobile'. That market seems to be somewhat volatile right now, and changing regularly. If you go mobile you have to be extremely quick to change and stay ahead of the curve of the market trends."

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE? "I can say that I'm excited both to show everyone what we're doing with [*Penny Arcade 4*] and also to keep working on and coming up with cool ideas for RPGs with our next one."

JONATHAN BLOW

COMPANY: Number None Inc
NOTABLE RELEASES: Braid

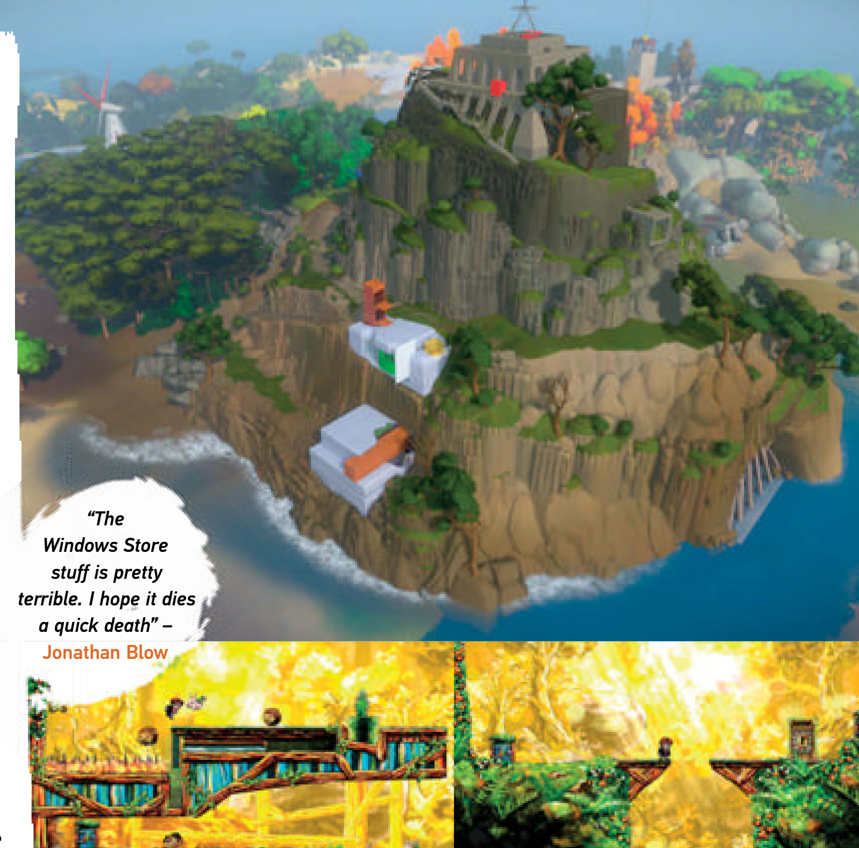


ARE INDIE GAMES A BUBBLE WAITING TO BURST? "There are a great many indies making 99-cent or free-to-play iOS games who are losing lots of money. So if that is what you are looking at, the bubble burst a long time ago. But for people who are not looking at this as a business, but rather as a way to do creative work, I think things are just fine, and will continue to be fine for a long time. The internet makes it much easier to find people interested in your stuff than it ever has been in the past. Of course, it helps if what you are making is actually interesting to people (which most 99-cent iPhone games etc are not)."

ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT THE WINDOWS 8 'WALLED GARDEN' APPROACH TO DISTRIBUTION? "Yeah, the Windows Store stuff is pretty terrible. I hope it dies a quick death."

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT INDIES? "I don't know, why should we? This is something every developer needs to answer for themselves: why should anyone out there pay attention to my game? All too often, because developers haven't asked themselves this hard question in an honest way, the answer is: they shouldn't. If, as a developer, you can figure out how to generate an honest and strong answer to this question then you are doing okay."

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE? "I am working hard on finishing *The Witness*. Beyond that, who knows!"



"The Windows Store stuff is pretty terrible. I hope it dies a quick death" – Jonathan Blow



COLIN NORTHWAY

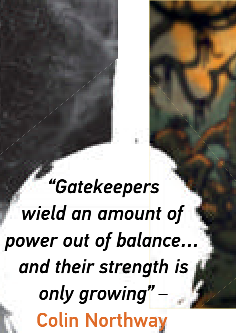
COMPANY: Northway Games
NOTABLE RELEASES: Incredipede / Fantastic Contraption / Rebuild

WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT BEING INDIE? "Making a game independently gives you an incredible amount of power. Power to talk with one voice... to express what you care about... to do something crazy... to follow your dreams."

AND WHAT'S BAD? "Game design is hard, game development is hard, game marketing is hard. Everything about it is hard and you have to get a lot of it right to make any money."

ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT THE WINDOWS 8 'WALLED GARDEN' APPROACH TO DISTRIBUTION? "Gardens with walls, everywhere you look there are walled gardens. This is a trend I hate. If you can corral an audience and make them yours then you can profit from that. You can take 30% of the profits from someone else's hard work because you own the audience. You can decide what games your audience sees and what they don't. But they don't provide the joyful experiences, they don't make you laugh and shout. The games do that. We do that. The gatekeepers wield an amount of power out of balance with the joy they bring the world and their strength is only growing."

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE? "I'll keep creating crazy new games that no one has ever seen before. I'll keep making joy."



"Gatekeepers wield an amount of power out of balance... and their strength is only growing" – Colin Northway



JUSTIN MA

COMPANY: Subset Games
NOTABLE RELEASES: FTL: Faster Than Light



WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT BEING INDIE? "Being an indie developer fits my living style… I'm quite self-motivated so I have no issue waking up and working all day, but being independent means I can do it in my pyjamas with a beer if I like. Such freedom has a great impact when developing games as well. Not having anyone to report to means we can be extremely agile and can alter our design if we find something fun."

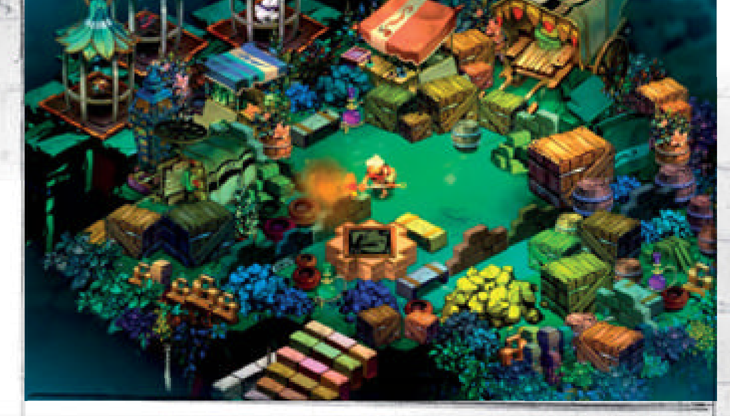
AND WHAT'S BAD? "It can be hard since we pretty much have to do everything ourselves. Not only are we the developers but we're also the owners, business managers, marketing, PR etc. These other aspects of releasing a commercial product can take a lot of time away from development."

WILL INDIES AND TRIPLE-A KILL OFF THE MIDDLE? "It's true that there has been a decline in middle-sized studios; it seems harder to develop games to compete with the large AAA high-budget titles that dominate a lot of the console market. However, the rise of crowdfunding may offer an alternative model for mid-budget studios to operate on rather than the traditional publisher/developer relationship. Only time will tell if it's sustainable."

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE? "We intend to keep making games for as long as possible."

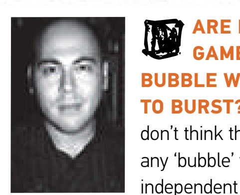


"It seems harder to develop games to compete with [AAA] titles" – Justin Ma



GREG KASAVIN

COMPANY: Supergiant Games
NOTABLE RELEASES: Bastion



ARE INDIE GAMES A BUBBLE WAITING TO BURST? "I don't think there's any 'bubble' with independent developers. Games continue to gain broader appeal, and smaller developers can do just fine making games for niche audiences. Independent games frequently offer great quality and great value through highly original experiences, so in that respect I think independent games pose a bigger threat to traditional boxed $60 titles than to each other."

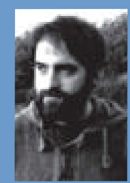
WILL INDIES AND TRIPLE-A KILL OFF THE MIDDLE? "I think we're already seeing a lot of evidence of what you're suggesting here. Over the past several years, many once-big studios have experienced massive layoffs or shut down completely… I do think the $60 boxed game is an increasingly dangerous proposition, where if you're not the absolute best in your category then you're likely going to fail really hard and set your publisher back by many millions of dollars."

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT INDIES? "I'm not one to tell people what they should do, but any game players out there lamenting the lack of originality in games these days aren't looking in the right places."

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE? "We don't know what the future holds, and know better than to try and plan too far ahead, especially these days. *Bastion* did well for us that it means we'll have another chance to make something on our own terms, and if we're lucky we'll get another chance after that, and on and on."

ED KEY

COMPANY: Twisted Tree Games
NOTABLE RELEASES: Proteus



ARE INDIE GAMES A BUBBLE WAITING TO BURST? "I think it's going from strength to strength. Check out twntytwlv.com for a big list of indie games that have come out this year… I really can't imagine 'indie' is a bubble, but certain trends (bundles, crowdfunding) might be reaching a tipping point where things end up rebalancing over the next year. The term 'indie' itself is kinda eroding and diluting a little, so maybe in a year or so we'll be calling it by various more specific names."

WILL INDIES AND TRIPLE-A KILL OFF THE MIDDLE? "Yeah, I think something like that seems possible… The other big force seems to be the growth of 'free to play' which 80% of any given games conference seems to be about these days, but it doesn't appeal to me."

ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT THE WINDOWS 8 'WALLED GARDEN' APPROACH TO DISTRIBUTION? "As a back-up plan I'm going to get Ubuntu installed and set up as a development system. It's going to be very interesting to see how much Valve pushes Linux forward as a viable gaming platform: they've already got Nvidia to update their Linux drivers on the back of Steam for Linux, so who knows?"

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE? "Currently I'm leaning towards either a simplified *XCOM*-like game or a second game about exploration, but with more of a survival/fairytale slant. I'll probably do a few prototypes of both…"



"Moving... toward a future that's very friendly toward small developers" – Derek Yu

DEREK YU

COMPANY: n/a
NOTABLE RELEASES: Aquaria / Spelunky / I'm OK – A Murder Simulator

ARE INDIE GAMES A BUBBLE WAITING TO BURST? "It seems like we're moving rapidly toward a future that's generally very friendly toward small developers. Just this past year we've seen the rise of Kickstarter, Humble Bundle, Steam Greenlight, Unity and other technologies that are making it easier to succeed as an indie. This stuff is only going to get better as time goes on."

WILL INDIES AND TRIPLE-A KILL OFF THE MIDDLE? "Creatively, there are games that can only be made by small teams and games that can only be made by large ones. A large company will never make a *Dwarf Fortress*, for example. It's far too complex, too crazy and too uncompromised. But *Dwarf Fortress* needs to exist – it adds this richness to gaming as a form of art and entertainment. So that's where I see indie games playing a crucial role now and into the future – in adding a wonderful texture to gaming that wouldn't exist if only large companies were allowed to thrive."

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE? "I'm not exactly sure... and I love that! Well, I have a general idea that I'm going to make some freeware games before starting on another large-scale commercial project."



"Mid-range, mid-budget titles will take the biggest hit in the next few years" – Dan Pinchbeck

DAN PINCHBECK

COMPANY: thechineseroom
NOTABLE RELEASES: Dear Esther



WILL INDIES AND TRIPLE-A KILL OFF THE MIDDLE? "Indies will survive I think, but I do worry about titles like *I Am Alive*, which take more than an indie budget to realise, but never get the push of the massive titles. Those mid-range, mid-budget titles will take the biggest hit in the next few years, I think."

WILL CONSOLE PLATFORM HOLDERS BE MORE OPEN TO INDIES IN FUTURE? "I look at what SCEA have done with *Journey* and *Unfinished Swan*, and the PSN third-party output through schemes like Pub Fund and they really understand the indie scene and want to support it. So the will is definitely there in some major publishers. Others could do with getting their houses in order, though."

ARE YOU WORRIED ABOUT THE WINDOWS 8 'WALLED GARDEN' APPROACH? "We haven't really looked into Windows 8 b media usually involves walled gardens having to be opened up as a kind of inevitable trend. There's a line beyond which the need fo t ends up being self-defeating and bad business. Most big companies figure that out sooner or later."

WHAT'S IN YOUR FUTURE? "We're finishing *Amnesia: A Machine For Pigs*, which will be out next year, and then straight into *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*, which is going to take at least another year, year and a half. So no rest for the wicked."



Ragnar Tørnquist

TURNS THE PAGE

Nearly seven years after Dreamfall's abrupt ending left players hanging, work has finally begun on its long-promised sequel, Dreamfall Chapters

Ragnar Tørnquist is balancing between two worlds. As a creative director for Norwegian developer Funcom, he's been hard at work on *The Secret World*, the genre-busting, story-heavy MMO that debuted last July after six years in development. But after all this time, the 2006 adventure game *Dreamfall* is still on his mind. "The idea and the story for *Dreamfall* is something that's been in my head, and other people's heads, for a while now," says Tørnquist, who designed both *Dreamfall* and its predecessor, *The Longest Journey*. "I think doing [a sequel] right after the last game would have been wrong. It needed to gestate for a while, it needed to rest. Now we know the way it needs to go and what we want to do about it. So it feels natural, it feels like the right time."

Funcom actually announced this sequel, *Dreamfall Chapters*, back in 2007. But since then the firm's focus has changed and it is now exclusively developing multiplayer online games. This means there can never be a *Dreamfall Chapters* from Funcom. And even though Tørnquist is the creative force behind the saga, Funcom owns the property.

Much like *The Longest Journey*'s protagonist April Ryan, who had to decide between staying

> In his games, Tørnquist believes that forging an emotional connection to the characters is key: "You're not just playing yourself. You're playing somebody else, somebody you're getting to know. And to leave them at the end of the game, or to even see some of these characters die and some change in radical ways – that's what a good story is, and what a good adventure game is."

> “We’re told that *Dreamfall Chapters* will pick up right where *Dreamfall* left off, but for now the plot remains a secret. “We know that people are going to play *Dreamfall Chapters* because of the story,” Tørnquist says. “That’s why players will come, so I don’t want to say too much about it other than a lot of the things that frustrated players with *Dreamfall* at the end – having all these unanswered questions – we will definitely address those.”

in the technologically oriented world of Stark or making the leap to the magical realm of Arcadia, Tørnquist was faced with a choice: “I knew that in order to do this, I’d have to start up a new studio and get the rights to make *Dreamfall Chapters*. That wasn’t an option until *The Secret World* was out there and I felt ready to leave that.” Though he will continue as a creative consultant for *The Secret World*, in November he announced the formation of new studio Red Thread Games to continue the *Dreamfall* saga. “I feel ready to do something else. I’ve been with Funcom for close to 18 years now; that’s a long time,” he says. “So I felt it was time, not to abandon my past, but to make a parallel life and slowly edge towards that.”

Such balance is a theme Tørnquist knows well: *The Longest Journey* and *Dreamfall* both deal with the cosmic symbiosis shared by parallel worlds. Released in 1999, right around the time leading adventure developers Sierra On-Line and LucasArts abandoned the genre, *The Longest Journey* was a point-and-click game that followed art student April Ryan’s reluctant acceptance of her ability to shift between the realms of Stark and Arcadia. In *Dreamfall*, April was joined by two other playable characters, college dropout Zoë Castillo of Stark and soldier Kian Alvane of Arcadia, whose involvement in conflicts on both sides of the divide threatened to upset the delicate balance between the two worlds. (The artwork shown in this article is from *The Longest Journey* and *Dreamfall*.)

While both games were praised for their storytelling, many players were disappointed by *Dreamfall*’s cliffhanger ending, which left all three protagonists’ fates unresolved and unapologetically set up a sequel. Tørnquist promises that *eamfall Chapters* will “conclude a lot of the stories that were begun in *Dreamfall* and also in *The Longest Journey*, and it’s going to be a game that comes to a satisfying conclusion. I’m not saying that we’re going to wrap the whole saga up. We’re still going to leave room for other stories to be told. But a lot of the most important threads are going to be tied together, tied up, at the end of *Dreamfall Chapters*.”



He’s not quite ready to disclose who will be joining him on this new journey, but promises the game is in good hands: “They’re people who have been involved with the previous games. It’s a lot of experienced gan developers… a team of veterans.” He’s equally tight-lipped regarding plot specifics, but does reveal that the original plan for episodic delivery has been scrapped and the story l envisions has changed somewhat since *Dreamfall Chapters* was first announced. “It’s been six years since *Dreamfall*, and our experiences have changed. We’ve read different things and we’ve seen different things, and we think differently than we did back then,” he explains. “At the same time, some things are, while I won’t say ‘set in stone,’ they’re already decided, because we have to follow through. Some things are predestined in a way: it’s written in the texture of *Dreamfall* and if you go back, you’ll see the links.” Over the years, he has kept an eye on forum discussions, and some of the ideas fans have brought up m

> “Playing the previous games (available from Steam and GOG.com) won’t be a prerequisite for *Dreamfall Chapters*, but it will help: “We hope that people will have enough time to go back and experience those stories again. But if you don’t have the time or the will to play through *The Longest Journey* and *Dreamfall*, there are going to be ways of digging into the universe and learning about the story.”



well end up in *Dreamfall Chapters*: "We do look at how people experience the story and think that maybe we should focus on this instead of that, or maybe we should go in this direction instead of that direction."

Though set in the same universe as *The Longest Journey* and involving some of the same characters, *Dreamfall* was more of a spin-off than a sequel, with very different visuals and gameplay. Unlike its point-and-click predecessor, *Dreamfall* had real-time 3D graphics with cinematic camerawork, action and stealth sequences mixed in with the puzzle solving, and controls that worked far better with a gamepad than a mouse. As a direct continuation, Tørnquist says *Dreamfall Chapters* will look and feel like *Dreamfall*, with a few major exceptions: "We're going to drop the awful combat that nobody enjoyed. And we're going to modify the controls quite a bit. You'll still be playing in a 3D world, with a third-person character, but we are going to make it smoother – to feel more intuitive, closer to what other third-person 3D games feel like, so players can just sit down and get to grips with it very quickly. We are going to do some interesting stuff with the cursor as well, to make it feel like a world that you can point at and click at and experience, because a lot of the soul of adventure games is being able to look at stuff, to interact with objects and the world and all the characters. We're going to make that [interaction] our big focus, that's sort of our key mechanic."

Dreamfall Chapters is still ultimately an evolution of *The Longest Journey*, and Tørnquist doesn't plan to abandon the series' roots. Instead, he hopes to strike a balance between nostalgia and innovation: "A lot of adventure games these days are sort of old school, like people are looking back, and there are a lot of players who have this nostalgia for what used to be. I think that's fine, but it's a dangerous path to take in the long run, because nostalgia will only get you so far. That's not what we want to do. Of course we want to appeal to people who played adventures ten years ago, enjoy adventure games, and are maybe missing that [old-school experience]. But at the same time, we do want to evolve the genre a bit. We want to introduce new mechanics. We want to make an immersive, interactive 3D world. We want to do something that hasn't necessarily been done with adventure games before. So we're trying to cover all the bases."

Red Thread Games has already begun work on *Dreamfall Chapters* with help from a Norwegian government grant, but additional funding will be needed before long. "We do need to get money from the community – from our fans, from our supporters – in order to make this happen," Tørnquist says. "The money we have now from the Norwegian Film Institute is mostly for the prototype stage, getting our first playable versions up and discovering how this game is going to work mechanically. But it will only take us that far. So [in early 2013] we will be turning to Kickstarter and asking people for more money, so we can make it."



Like many recent projects, Tørnquist's decision to crowd-fund *Dreamfall Chapters* was influenced by Tim Schafer's wildly successful *Double Fine Adventure* campaign, which raised $3.5m last March: "From the moment that Double Fine did their Kickstarter, I've received several emails each and every day, asking when *Dreamfall Chapters* is going to be on Kickstarter. Of course that's made a big difference." He acknowledges, however, that many crowd-funding campaigns have made a lot less money and have had to work harder to get it. (Six of the highest-profile adventure game Kickstarters after Double Fine's – a *Broken Sword* sequel, a Tex *Murphy* sequel, and four games spearheaded by former Sierra designers – have averaged only about half a million dollars per project.) "Double Fine had the advantage of being a productive studio that puts out several games every year. They've definitely been doing stuff, so you sense that when they start something, they will deliver," Tørnquist says.

Nonetheless, he's optimistic that *Dreamfall Chapters* will find its audience. "There's so much more you can do with

"Stories are becoming more and more important in games," Tørnquist says. "It still doesn't match the best of films, or the best of TV, or the best of novels. But it's heading in that direction, it's definitely trying, and I think the [adventure] genre's being appreciated for that."

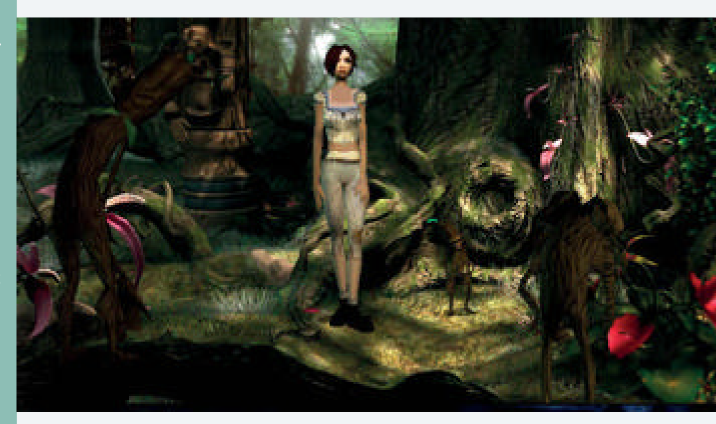
With *Dreamfall Chapters*, Tørnquist hopes to strike a balance between familiar and new: "We want to evolve, to grow and not be stuck in the past, but… we do want to make sure that we're still appealing to players who played *The Longest Journey* and *Dreamfall* in the first place."

"We want to make an immersive, interactive 3D world. We want to do something that hasn't necessarily been done with adventure games before"

Throwing the Fight

■ DIE-HARD *THE Longest Journey* fans were miffed by *Dreamfall*'s inclusion of real-time combat sequences. Tørnquist responds: "We wanted to have the possibility of adding more conflict and more danger, a world where you had more avenues of interaction, of different game mechanics… I think we struggled with an unknown engine, the time and the commitment to it as well. At the end, it just didn't come together the way we wanted it to… Our original goal was to have situations, puzzles, where you could choose to talk your way out of it, or to puzzle your way out of it, or to fight, and there are a couple cases in *Dreamfall* where you can make that choice, although I don't think most players realised that."

With combat absent from *Dreamfall Chapters*, he hopes to find different ways to infuse the gameplay with tension: "Of course we don't want to make the same mistake again, but we do want to introduce mechanics that aren't old-school adventure mechanics, [so we have] some concrete ideas, some concrete designs for that. It's not going to be button-mashing combat, but it evolves and expands adventure mechanics quite a bit." How about the addition of Quick Time Events, as used recently by adventures like *Heavy Rain* and *The Walking Dead*? "I enjoyed *Heavy Rain* quite a bit, for various reasons," Tørnquist says. "But it's not an interface that I feel would be right for a game like *Dreamfall*."



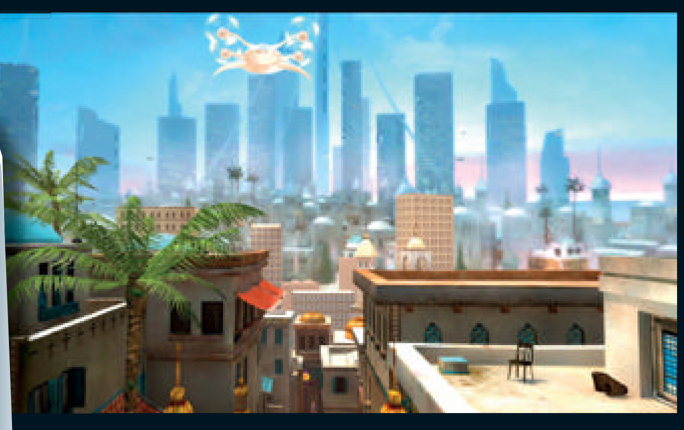


"The theme of the game is basically about the chapters of life," Tørnquist says of *Dreamfall Chapters*. "How life itself is divided into chapters of a story, with a beginning, a middle and an end. It's always been how we divided the story – between characters, between events, between chapters of a journey." *The Longest Journey* was even framed as a story told by an old woman whom players have speculated is April.

games now [than when *Dreamfall* and *The Longest Journey* came out], because there are so many more platforms, so many different ways of funding games. You can appeal to segments and niches and be quite successful doing that," Tørnquist says. "The adventure game has neither 'come back' nor 'died' or anything e that, it's just that with the market the way it is, you can make a game for much less than you used to, and distribute it, and make back your money through lower sales than was the case ten years ago. You can find segments that have been undernourished – for example, the adventure segment. It might not have grown or changed at all in the last ten years, but finally you can appeal to and target that segment… You don't have to be the #1 big seller AAA game, you don't have to have a huge presence in stores [massive amount of marketing. You can target a segment, a niche, a genre, and you can make a good game within that segment and be successful."

Even so, the fate of *Dreamfall Chapters* will rest on Red Thread's Kickstarter campaign, and Tørnquist hopes that hon , transparency and the team's experience will enable them to raise the funds. "We plan on being very clear and realistic about what our budget is and what we need in order to make this game. We plan to be pretty open in terms of what the game is going to be about, and how long it's going to take, and what kind of people we have working on it," he says. "Hopefully we'll be able to show that we can be trusted with the game, and the world, and the story, and we are going to make the best game that the Kickstarter money allows us to make."

"Length-wise, I would compare [*Dreamfall Chapters*] to umfall," Tørnquist says. "It's not going to be as long as *The Longest Journey* – that was a pretty long game."



A Brave New (Open) World

THOUGH TØRNQUIST SAYS he's been "actively sitting out of playing games lately," he has put in some time with *Assassin's Creed III* and is excited by its storytelling possibilities: "I'm a big fan of those games, because it's amazing how they can give us access to these places – to be able to visit colonial USA, to visit Boston and New York, this vast new world, it's incredibly fascinating. It's what games are about: travelling into these fantastic spaces, not necessarily based on fantasy or science fiction, but based on history. Even though *Assassin's Creed* has its faults, it's still so fascinating to me that we can at this point emulate that world, those settings, and make it feel so real.

"I would hate to make a comparison between *Dreamfall Chapters* and *Assassin's Creed*," he adds, "but just having more freedom to explore and freedom to move about the world in a more organic and fluid way, is something that we're taking a long, hard look at. Having the ability to take on a variety of story threads at once, in an order that you choose to, so you can be presented with four or five different things you can do. Still things that are story-driven and puzzle-based, but that aren't one puzzle after the other after the other. Giving a little bit more freedom to choose your path and to explore and to experience a world at your own pace."

Team Bondi's 1940s detective game *LA Noire* already tried this by presenting procedural police investigations within a sprawling open world. Tørnquist loved the technology and the setting, but found some of the adventure mechanics unintuitive and frustrating. Still, he considers *LA Noire* "a brave experiment" and hopes for more games like it: "If we could find a way to connect the modern adventure to that feeling of freedom and a living, breathing world, that [would be] the Holy Grail. Not just a game that's based on fighting all the time or stabbing people in the back. A game that's based on being immersed in this amazing world."



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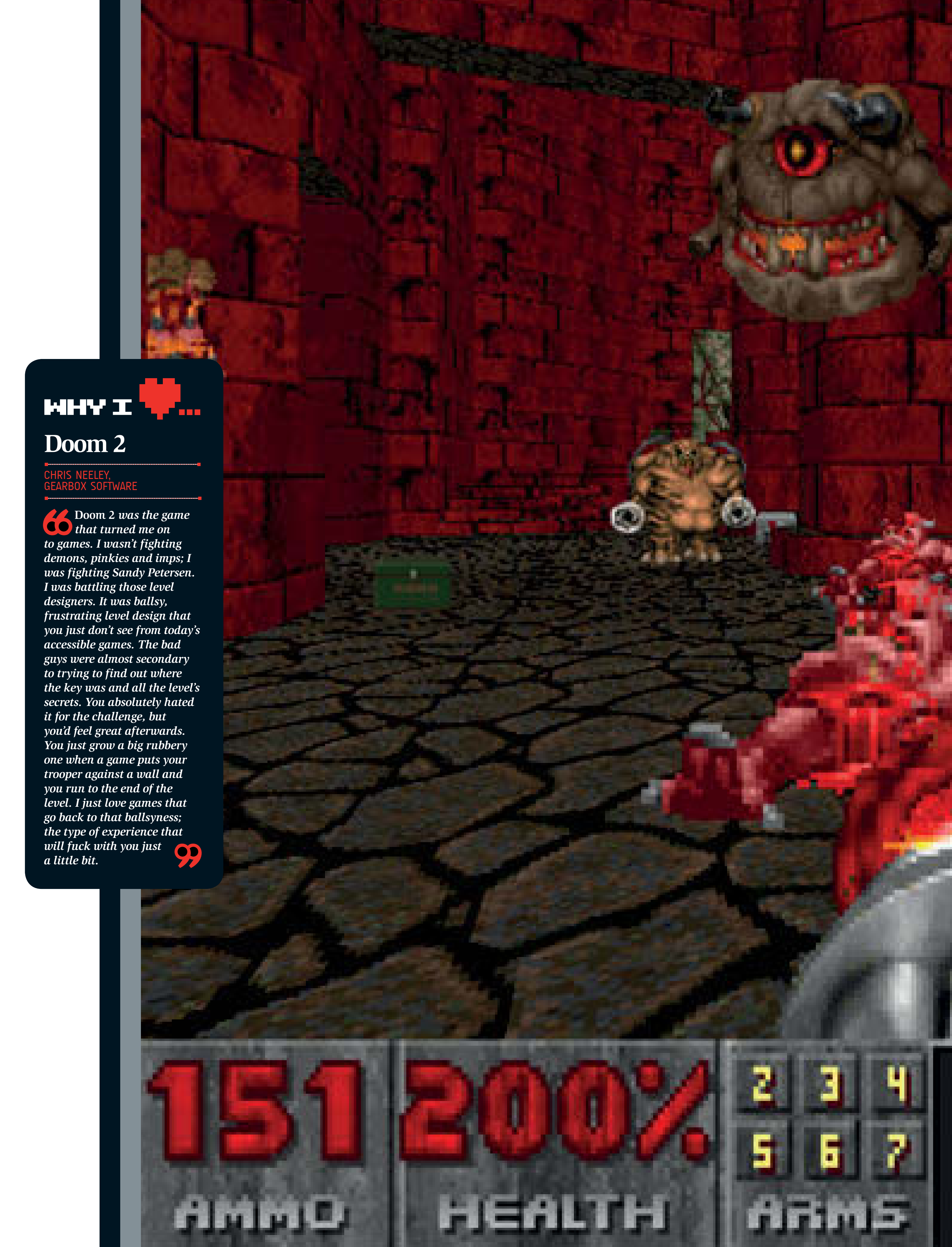






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WHY I ♥...

Doom 2

CHRIS NEELEY, GEARBOX SOFTWARE

"Doom 2 was the game that turned me on to games. I wasn't fighting demons, pinkies and imps; I was fighting Sandy Petersen. I was battling those level designers. It was ballsy, frustrating level design that you just don't see from today's accessible games. The bad guys were almost secondary to trying to find out where the key was and all the level's secrets. You absolutely hated it for the challenge, but you'd feel great afterwards. You just grow a big rubbery one when a game puts your trooper against a wall and you run to the end of the level. I just love games that go back to that ballsyness; the type of experience that will fuck with you just a little bit."

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“”

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> “I wasn’t fighting demons, pinkies and imps; I was fighting Sandy Petersen. I was battling those level designers”

CHRIS NEELEY, GEARBOX SOFTWARE

Reviews



98
DmC Devil May Cry
The first killer purchase of the year?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













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A SPIRITED SUCCESS

Ni No Kuni: Wrath Of The White Witch

So we're feeling pretty greedy right now. Level-5 and Studio Ghibli have been slaving away for nearly five years to create the most beautiful videogame ever, but what do we do as soon as we get our hands on it? Why, we wolf if down, lick the bowl clean and thrust it out, demanding a second helping. It's impossible not to want more. It's *delicious*. Coming as it does from two creative teams at the top of their respective fields, we expect nothing less. And it's expectations such as these that harm *Ni No Kuni* most of all – were it not for the generous servings of inimitable Ghibli style in the early stages of the game, the rest of it would shine far brighter than it does when eclipsed by that initial exciting explosion of potential.

Allow us to explain. Early on, *Ni No Kuni* is the Studio Ghibli show. The anime team takes centre stage, its animated sequences and artistic style lending the game a wow factor rivalled only by the Squaresoft FMV openings of old within the genre. Even the narrative could have fallen straight out of one of the studio's movies, even though in this instance it's Level-5 on script duty just with its pens clearly loaded with Ghibli-branded ink cartridges. The scene is set beautifully and from the tragic circumstances that see Oliver take the spotlight to the fantastical world he ends up in, everything is just… well, for want of a better word, perfect.

But as events unfold, Studio Ghibli's direct involvement and contribution seems to wane. Its style never drains from the colourful world nor from the cast of generally likeable characters (sit down, Swaine) but as much as it still *looks* like a playable anime by the latter stages, it no longer feels like one. Well, not to the degree it does early on, at least. Hand-drawn sequences are extremely front-loaded – a third of them take place before you even leave Motorville for the first time – and voiced sequences slowly grow less and less frequent until you're reading more or less everything that doesn't bookend a boss battle. Usually, that wouldn't necessarily be a big deal but having been spoiled by such a lavish opening, it's hard not to develop a strange sense of entitlement and expectation, even though our logical brains know that to keep that tempo up for the entire game would most likely have bankrupted everyone involved.

And in any case, Ghibli stepping into the wings only allows Level-5 more room to demonstrate its ability. It's hardly the most ambitious or experimental studio but it generally does what it does so well that it's tough to complain – it's pretty much gaming's Jason Statham in that respect. Like *Dragon Quest IX* before it, *Ni No Kuni* deviates little from the writ-in-stone JRPG template older than most of the game's players and probably

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

ACTION: Move about and press buttons to dodge or block attacks… RPG: Only that sometimes won't work, because of status attacks and such. It's an odd mix, but it does work. Generally.

IF YOU'VE EVER WATCHED AN ANIME AND WONDERED TO YOURSELF WHAT IT MIGHT BE LIKE TO EXPLORE THAT WORLD, YOU'RE UNLIKELY TO FIND ANYTHING CLOSER IN THE NEAR FUTURE



DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: Level-5
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: 25 January
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Below: When we saw this area in early screens, we expected *El Shaddai*-style platforming sections. Thankfully, this is the only time the camera snaps side-on, and it works.



Above: Exploration is never a chore, especially once you start unlocking the various fast travel options on offer. One of which is a dragon. YES.

Leftt: Soaring around the world map on a dragon's back as strings swell is utterly captivating. It's the perfect way to take in this beautiful world.

BETTER THAN

TALES OF GRACES F

WORSE THAN

DRAGON QUEST IX: SENTINELS OF THE STARRY SKIES

I CHOOSE YOU... PUNCHYDUDE?

Pokemon similarities aren't hard to spot here, although it'd be remiss to accuse an RPG of copying the Nintendo format on that basis alone. In truth, the Familiar mechanic is worlds away from the Nintendo franchise – monsters change little when evolved (physically, at least) and the regular lot offer little beyond the capabilities of the late-game alternatives. Even when you do find a viable option, levelling them to a front-line-ready degree can be a chore, although it's one in which many JRPG veterans will revel.

Inset: Drippy follows you tirelessly, offering advice and wisecracks at every opportunity. Too bad he's useless in battle...

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS

○ Holy balls, this game is beautiful. Outside of maybe *Journey*, you'll struggle to find a more artistically gorgeous game on PS3 – from the slick visuals to the Tokyo Philharmonic score, it's just lovely.

20 HOURS

○ Combat is a lot better with all three characters on board, it turns out. Even if one of those characters is infuriating. We can't help but notice that all the Ghibli content is somewhat frontloaded, though…

2 WEEKS

○ A good amount of post-game content means you'll be mopping up for ages. Only the truly hardcore will bother trying to catch 'em all, though end-game Gold Familiars make it awfully tempting to try.



twice as old as its target audience. But just as with its twist on the beloved Enix property, there's just enough creativity and improvisation to make the game feel oddly fresh even though it fundamentally isn't.

The battle system is the most obvious deviation from the line-up-and-wait-your-turn-to-hit-the-baddies standard, an action/RPG hybrid that calls to mind the largely underappreciated *White Knight Chronicles* games albeit with a distinct *Pokémon* vibe permeating the whole thing. Although human characters can participate in battle, most of the fighting is done by Familiars, cute creatures that can be caught in the wild, trained and evolved (sound familiar?) to create your tailor-made mini army. An interesting twist sees HP and MP shared between characters and their Familiars – leave an attack-oriented monster in harm's way for too long and it's unlikely that switching to one with healing abilities will give it time to top up the party's life effectively, if at all.

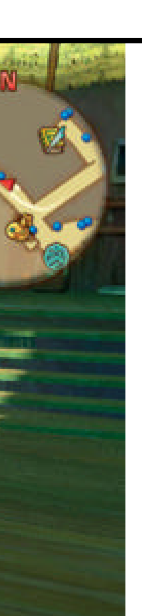
And while the combat mechanics generally work brilliantly, it's not a system without its problems. The few selectable AI routines on offer don't really seem to allow allies to be set up to fill key roles effectively – designated healers will still burn MP on ineffective attack spells, for instance, plus there's no real way to set up characters to tank effectively despite Familiars existing to fill just that hole in a party – and switching characters automatically withdraws their familiar from battle, wasting potentially crucial seconds as you re-summon. Learn to work around or at least expect these issues and it's all good, though – none of it is game-breaking and with a little forethought (and dexterity, oddly for a menu-driven RPG), even the most challenging of opponents can be felled. Later bosses really show off the depth of the system to an impressive degree, even if the

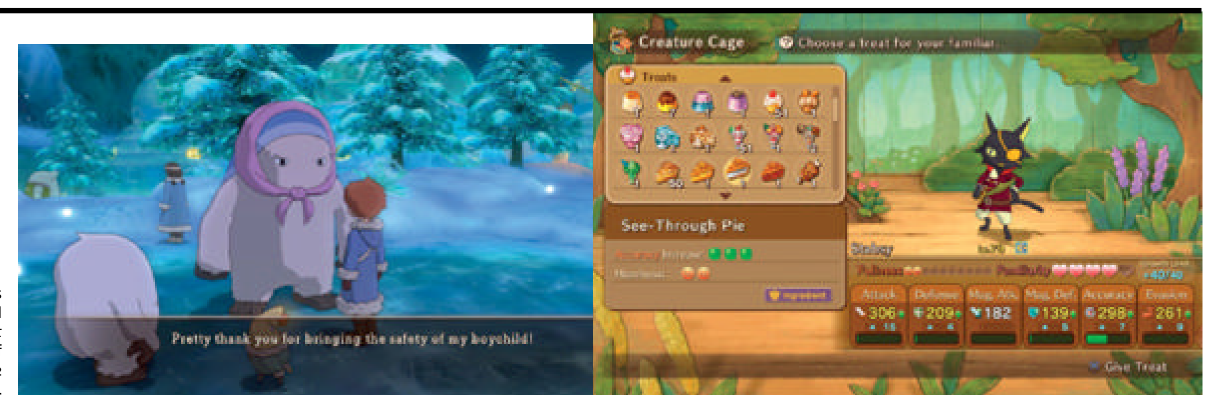
ALCHE-YOU, ALCHEMY

Item crafting is a big deal in the world of *Ni No Kuni* and many NPCs understand this better than the player, apparently. While most recipes are offered as quest rewards, some are given out just for talking to the denizens of this curious world – you'll never know who might have secrets to share so it's best to chat with everyone just in case. Y'know, like in an old school RPG. It's an old-fashioned solution to an old-fashioned problem but we'd be lying if we said we weren't excited by this talk-to-everyone-just-in-case approach. Sometimes, a lack of signposting can be a good thing.

Below: The Fairyground is *Ni No Kuni*'s most beautiful location. It's no coincidence that it's also the town where Studio Ghibli's influence and artistry is most prominent…

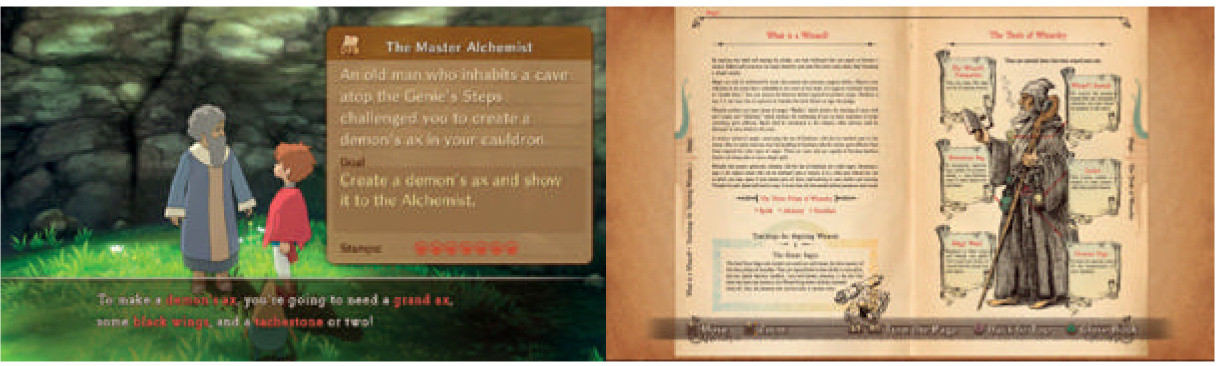






Left: Oliver and friends get new outfits based on the regions they're exploring – swimsuits for this beach resort and snowcoats for a winter wonderland, for instance.

Right: Each town has its own unique feel and culture, plus you never know what kinds of outlandish folk you're going to meet, either.



Left: Whether you want early access to alchemy recipes or need to know where to farm materials, the Wizard's Companion is the place to go. The book is gorgeous, too.

typically filthy final showdown is the expected case of 'bugger off and grind or bang your head against it until you get lucky'.

The world itself, though, is deserving of far more discussion than we have given it thus far or perhaps even *could* give it in this amount of space. Simply put, it's stunning – just pottering around on the world map or soaring from A to B on the back of a dragon is as satisfying as the high points of many other games. And while it's tropetacular in terms of the locations themselves – fancy forests, deserts, ice kingdoms and lava areas – each is so beautifully depicted and intricately detailed that it's impossible to care. Ghibli's style is recreated perfectly by Level-5 here and if you've ever watched an anime and wondered to yourself what it might be like to explore that world, you're unlikely to find anything closer to that in the near future. The score could perhaps emphasise this a little better, mind, and extended play will leave you wanting area-specific tunes to accent their beauty – as good as the Hisaishi soundtrack is, it's tough to stop that initially described greed and expectation from bubbling back to the surface in wanting more.

To best experience this lush fantasy world, defaults must be tampered with. While the English voice track is generally pretty good – especially by JRPG standards – it's still best enjoyed subtitled, as with much of Ghibli's work, especially since the impressive

Above: Some of the later side-quests are tucked deviously away in nooks and crannies so well concealed that only the eagle-eyed will spot them.

FAQs

Q. GO ON THEN, HOW LONG IS IT?
Truth be told, you could probably blitz the story alone in about 30 hours. Drinking in the beautiful world is a huge part of the experience, though.

Q. BIG WORLD?
It's not exactly small, though it could arguably do with a few more dungeons and towns to help it feel properly expansive.

Q. MUCH ANIME?
Not as much as we'd like. Although, to be honest, if the early rush of hand-drawn cutscenes was maintained for the duration, the game would probably still be on course for a 2018 release.

WHILE THE ENGLISH VOICE TRACK IS GENERALLY PRETTY GOOD, IT'S STILL BEST ENJOYED SUBTITLED, AS WITH MUCH OF GHIBLI'S WORK

localisation work that has gone on here sometimes isn't quite done justice by the vocal cast. Well, Drippy aside; the fairy king's rich Welsh dialect and colloquial language loses something in text form. Similarly, disabling the overly obvious Guiding Star on the map adds to the mystique and gives a better sense of exploring this alien world, leaving discovery to the player rather than simply making the whole thing a star-following adventure that holds your hand every step of the way. A useful addition for children; not the best way to enjoy it as an adult.

However you play it, though, *Ni No Kuni* is every bit the brilliant Level-5 RPG that we've come to know and expect. As much as it plays to convention, we wouldn't want anything else – the studio knows its craft and excels at it, creating a brilliant JRPG dressed up in Studio Ghibli's fanciest suit to create something jaw-dropping on a visual level even if the mechanics deviate little from established traditions.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GOTTA CATCH 'EM ALL: Only you don't. As much as super-powered Familiars help in the late-game battles, they're not essential in assuring success. Your starting team, if treated well, will do the job comfortably.

While Square Enix attempts to reinvent the wheel, Level-5 is clearly happy to create a very pretty round thing and let players decide what it is they see and take from it. And in truth, *Ni No Kuni* lacks Ghibli's usual universal appeal – its themes, while universally agreeable, lack the usual Ghibli cross-generational appeal. There's little ambiguity to Oliver's relatively one-dimensional tale and the optional post-game revelation serves only to confuse matters further.

But either way, the route to the narrative conclusion is paved in awesome – in terms of traditional JRPG mechanics, Level-5 does a damn good job and although we'd have liked to have seen greater Ghibli involvement in the end-game, we're as aware as anyone that a couple more cute, emotional anime scenes towards the end wouldn't be worth the millions of dollars that it would have cost to animate.

VERDICT 8/10
SO BEAUTIFUL, YOU CAN'T HELP BUT WANT AND EXPECT MORE

WAR… WAR NEVER ENDS. IT NEVER BLOODY ENDS. AND YOU WON'T WANT IT TO

Planetside 2

In their downtime, all *Planetside* veterans can do is tell war stories. "On Oshur, the Battletechs crushed us quicker than the AMS could spawn us." "In the forests of Hossin we hid from Reavers, while the squad leader screamed on the command channel for air cover." "My AI Max was the last survivor of a downed Galaxy on a remote Searhus tower, holding off Barneys until the ammo ran out." Very few people played the first game but, if you got past the crazy lag shooting and the ridiculously high system specifications, you never stopped talking about it.

And *Planetside 2*… is the same game. It's the same massively-multiplayer shooter set on several huge continents that each hold up to 2000 players. Though Sony has in fact rebuilt the game and changed many features, it has rebuilt it using modern tech on exactly the same lines. This lack of perspective is the game's blessing and its curse. It means SOE has learned exactly what worked and didn't work over the nine years since the first game, fixed it and polished it – so the lag-shooting has gone and the system specifications are believable. On the other hand, it means that it's making their decisions on the basis of a vocal hardcore community – and that it's not always aware of what the new, huge free-to-play community wants.

For example, when you first join the game, you have no idea what's going on; unlike the equally impenetrable *Eve*, though, *Planetside 2* should be accessible – it's just that SOE seems to have gone out of its way to make it difficult. For example, unlike *Eve*, there's no tutorial. New players are hot-dropped straight from the (very restricted) character creation into the thickest battle on the planet. Like most starting players, we lasted four seconds on our first drop. Veterans learn to watch for the swarm of landing pods and finish off the disoriented newbies, who were expecting such unreasonable things like a guide to the controls or a key to explain what all the floating icons mean. For colourblind gamers, it's even worse, as enemies and friends are indistinguishable. (If you are colourblind, some good advice is to play as the Terrans – at least the other factions are the same colour.)

Even once you've learned where your weapons are and who the enemy are and how they're not always flagged as such and what all the different classes are and how to change them – even then, the wider game can make no sense. It's not obvious how to capture facilities or what the many different resource units are or where they're coming from or how to fly the multiple aircraft effectively or

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Sony Online Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 2000 per continent; currently 6000 per server
MINIMUM SPEC: Win XP, Core 2 Duo, 4GB Ram, 256MB video card (Nvidia 8600 / AMD 4850), 15GB hard drive.
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Below: At the moment, anti-air is unrewarding – no single foot unit can take on a single air unit, despite the apparent fragility of the aircraft. Only the three faction-specific light aircraft are really fair game – the light Terran Mosquito, the hardy NC Reaver or the bizarre Vanu Scythe.



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

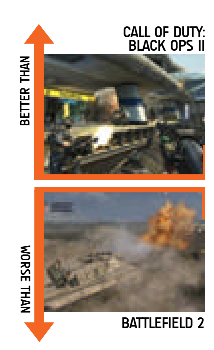
LOVED THESE: Now dropped, the first game had two purely pacifist supply and support vehicles – the AMS and the ANT – which would trundle their way across the landscape like colonists on the Oregon Trail.

Right: The largest bases are highly complicated, with generators, spawn points, control points, turrets and more to defeat and capture – let alone the enemy troops.

A GAME SO HANDSOME THAT IN THE MIDDLE OF A VICIOUS FIREFIGHT SOMEONE ASKS "HAVE YOU SEEN THAT SUNSET?" AND YOU HAVE TO LOOK

Left: The Vanu's gravtanks can strafe, bizarrely. Below: The three man Liberator gunship/bomber provokes panic when ground troops sight it – if equipped with hi-explosive turrets, it can kill entire squads in seconds; with armour-piercing, it can wipe out tank columns.





FAQs

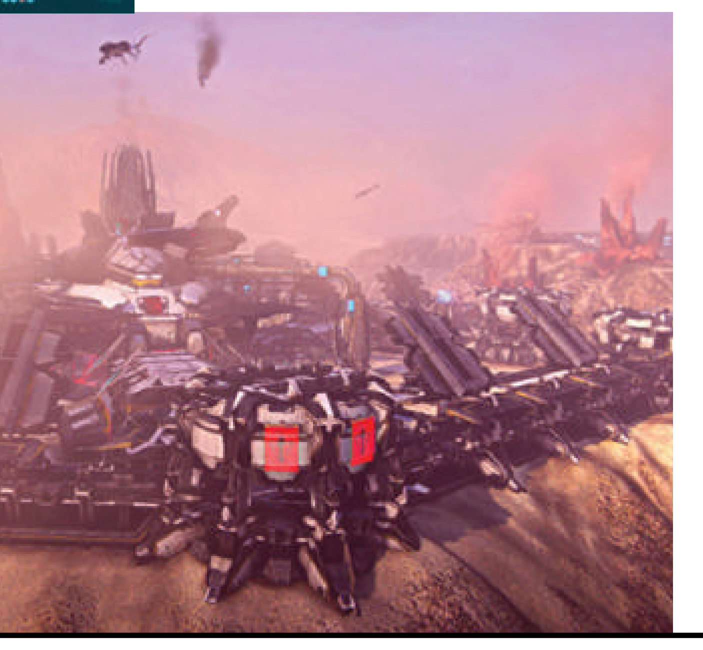
Q. WHAT IS A 2000-PERSON BATTLE LIKE?
As soon as one side loses its spawn points, it's game over.

Q. IS IT TOTALLY FREE?
Yep, though there are microtransactions and a monthly membership, if you want it.

Q. WHAT'S THE LEARNING CURVE LIKE?
PS1 Veterans will learn in a couple of hours; new players may take up to a day to get acclimatised.

THE SECRET HISTORY

Planetside 2 does have a backstory, but most players don't know it – except where the factions are concerned. Here's a summary; the facistic government of Earth found a wormhole to a new world, rich in alien artefacts that guaranteed immortality. However, after a small colony was established, the wormhole collapsed and two rebellions started – one of the people, able finally to escape the dictators and one of intellectuals, who wanted to emulate the aliens. So the Terran Republic is the original government of Auraxis, dictatorial and authoritarian. They have a red and black colour scheme, a martial classical soundtrack and powerful weapons. The New Conglomerate are the rebels, with blue and yellow outfits, cheesy rock and heavy armour. And the Vanu Sovereignty are the alien-loving outsiders, with purple and cyan armour, soft electronica and weird tech.



what most of the buttons do. Auto-joining squads is often no help as they're full of newbies like you.

Yet, push through that disorientation and join a well-crewed outfit (the game's equivalent of a guild) or a group of friends, and the game changes completely. Suddenly, you're corralled into a squad and given targets. You have people to work with, balanced squads you can lay plans with – all hopping into aircraft or tanks to capture an isolated air tower, say, so your faction dominates the skies in a region behind the frontlines and the enemy has to fight on two fronts. You can also make sure you've got a medic and engineer around to patch up troops and vehicles, and suddenly your survivability shoots up, along with your kill-death ratio.

And as you gain expertise, you realise the combat is *fun*. Sure the weapons feel light. But the mix of the landscape, your loadout, the facilities you're fighting over, the size and make-up of the forces on either side; all these make it the most variable combat you'll come across. And when you're pinned down deep in a base and the whole building is shaking from a gunship barrage… the weapons don't feel light any more.

As you rank up by killing and capturing objectives, you also slowly gain certification points, which you can use to unlock upgrades and new weapons. These are best saved for scopes and the like, as weapon unlocks (and sidegrades) can be bought with real money. It says something that a lot of players have spent their own money buying in-game weapons, upgrades, skins and camouflage – both because you have to, to get the most of the game, and because you want to.

It also has to be said that *Planetside 2* is simply one of the most beautiful games around, without the usual low-poly and closed area limitations of an MMO. Night on Auraxis is truly dark, the day is clear and bright, and it feels like a real world. The three continents take you from snowy steppes to wooded canyons to arid mountains, all studded with arcologies, crashed spaceships and alien structures straight off the cover of a pulp Fifties SF novel – but they don't feel out of place. We've never played a shooting game where, in the middle of a heavy firefight, you see people typing into local chat "Have you seen that sunset?" and you have to look, because it's too pretty to miss.

Apparently, there is a plot behind the revised *Planetside*, but no-one playing has ever seen it. Not that it matters, because you make your own stories in this game. Many people's stories are going to be that they tried it, didn't understand what was going on, and got killed more times than Kenny. For those who push through, this will be an all-consuming experience, with the satisfying-in-itself combat of *Team Fortress 2*, without that game's hats or anarchy. But with many, many more war stories.



THE BEST LARGE SCALE BATTLE SIMULATOR EVER MADE

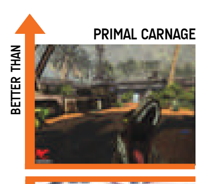
YOUR NEW FAVOURITE FPS

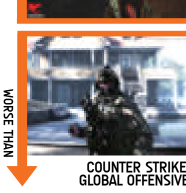
Natural Selection 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Unknown Worlds
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £18.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1+
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
PRIMAL CARNAGE





WORSE THAN
COUNTER STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

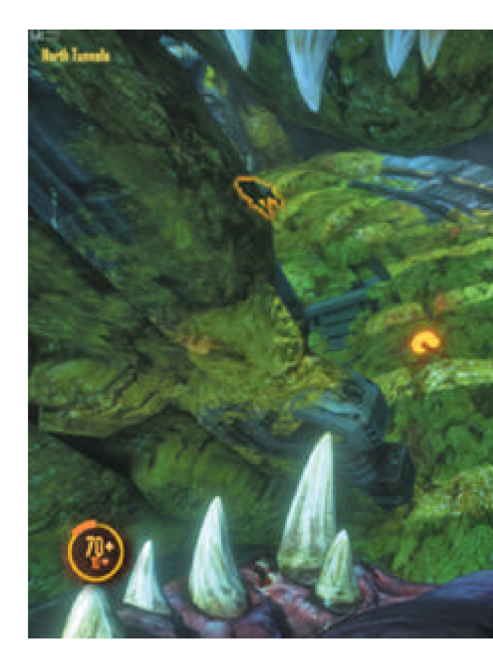
***Natural Selection 2* is stubbornness; it is bull-headed devotion to a single idea; it is passion personified and everything in between.** The original *Half-Life* mod released a decade ago and despite the innovation it brought to the FPS genre we've seen very little like it in the years since, which is pretty rare in an industry so reliant on the borrowing of great ideas. *Natural Selection* introduced asymmetrical multiplayer, blended RTS into FPS and introduced an element of horror never before seen in online FPS gaming, and this new sequel doesn't stray from that original idea even slightly.

So to look at *Natural Selection 2* it'd be fair to think it's nothing more than a HD remake, a graphical overhaul that keeps the game looking modern but the underlying mechanics largely the same. In many ways that is true: the objectives *are* still the same and each of the original innovations *are* present and correct, almost unchanged from the original mod. But then this isn't a mod, this is a full standalone release and though it doesn't appear to break any new ground, that is purely because it is preceded only by itself. No one has attempted to mimic *Natural Selection* in its ten years of absence, and that's something worth cherishing.

The idea is simple: humans (or Marines, to use their in-game title) battle aliens on a series of different maps. But this isn't simply another deathmatch; there's only one mode, with both teams beginning with a starting base that must be defended from attackers and vice versa.

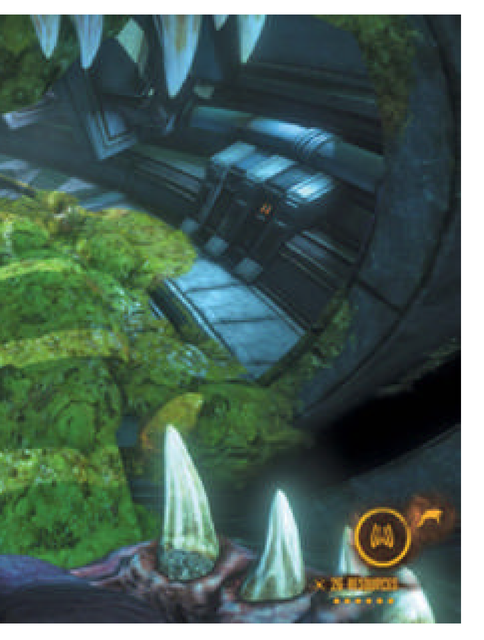
Each map is a sprawling maze of space station corridors connecting individual named rooms. Your objective is to vie for control over these rooms – whether aliens or marines – to ensure your team receives a steady dose of resources. This'll earn you additional options for your team, gradually increasing your overall strength and, hopefully, reward you with the final push on the last base.

How you navigate the map depends on the faction you choose to side with. Aliens, for



Above: Lying in wait on a ceiling or attached to the walls as an alien Skulk is one of the best thrills we've had in a multiplayer game for a long time.

Below: Marines will need power for all their machinery, giving aliens a vital structure to target when attacking a base. Aliens require infested ground for their structures.



FAQs

Q. ALIENS OR MARINES?
It really comes down to personal preference. Both factions are far more balanced in *NS2* than the original mod, leaving you to pick a favourite.

Q. CAN I COMMAND?
We'd highly recommend you learn the basics before jumping into this role, you'll likely get ejected – or worse, kicked – if you fail to meet expectations.

Q. HOW ELITIST IS IT?
Depends on the server, really. If you search for Rookie-friendly servers you'll find it a little more forgiving if you don't immediate know what you're doing.

Below: Commander mode probably won't be seen by a large portion of players, but it's an important all-seeing-eye mode than needs quick RTS-like reactions to ensure you can spread out through the map quickly and efficiently.



BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

Natural Selection 2 also comes with it's own simple to ease creation tool. Perfect for modders – and tying into Steam Workshop – this means there are untold possibilities with endless new maps created by the very people that play the game as well as tweaks and alterations to make the game better than its vanilla version. It's almost a necessity for a game like *Natural Selection 2* – which began life as a mod – to include such a feature, but Unknown Worlds has cleverly seen the future. Including a community of creators around their game will bring additional longevity to what would surely be an otherwise limited fanbase.

THE ORIGINAL NATURAL SELECTION SUFFERED FROM THE SAME AGGRESSIVE CRITICS THAT PLAGUE THE GAME NOW

example, can scurry along walls and through vents to quickly pass through the map or claim an advantage on an overwhelming force of marines. Their benefit is their speed, while additional abilities let them see in the dark or switch to a unique view that helps track allies and enemies – even through walls. And the marines? They're a little more simple: aided through research, it's up to each player to pick and choose their weapon to use against the alien swarms, beginning with assault rifles then through to shotguns, flamethrowers and, eventually, mech suits.

Yet while it is the asymmetrical gameplay that is the USP of *Natural Selection 2*, it's the commanders that make it work. This is where the RTS elements come in, producing a top-down view of the map to issue commands, utilise abilities and build structures. Each faction differs in how they command too, with the marines issuing build orders for the boots on the ground to action while the aliens must spread its infestation through the environment with a chain of cysts in a fashion similar to *Warcraft 3*'s Undead Plague.

Stepping into the commander's seat is an unnerving task, however, one made tougher by the endless trolls just waiting for a single slip-up from a newcomer to the hot seat. It bundles in team management and unit progression into one role, and knowing what is involved is of primary importance. Unfortunately there's no safe place to practice this task without risking the ire of your team-mates, and the included videos explaining the role aren't tantamount to the experience of a single match. This is one of the downsides to this sequel: the original *Natural Selection* suffered from the same aggressive critics that plague the game now, a problem that is admittedly endemic of the importance of this role. Without a good commander – and the upgrades and rewards that come with it – your team will be weakened, ripe for the taking when the opposing team rolls in, giving the rest of the players an easy scapegoat to blame if you fail to life up to the task.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BASICS: The only thing holding *Natural Selection 2* back is its high barrier to entry. Not knowing what to do or how to do it will see you die a lot, and an added offline mode would ease newcomers in.

But when it all works, when it all comes together, *Natural Selection 2* provides a very unique brand of FPS multiplayer game. Aliens can evolve to different forms, unlocking various abilities and adapting their playstyle dramatically. Marines bunch up together, building structures symbiotically with the commander while combining their firepower to bring down the more powerful alien evolutionary forms. It's a system reliant on teamwork, and there are few games that can match it in that regard, making each success feels hard won.

It's a shame then that, even now, *Natural Selection 2* is failing to receive any of the excitement it deserves. Perhaps it's a problem with the overwhelming nature of the game – again, all the more reason to include an offline or private match set up for those wishing to train before jumping headlong into the swarm – but we found a surprising amount of empty servers throughout our time with Natural Selection 2. We're not worried for the game's future, there will always be a diehard community here just as was the case with the original too, but it is a very valid concern that Unknown Worlds needs to address.

So all in all it's probably best not to think of *Natural Selection 2* as a reinvention and, in fact, more of a distillation. It's taken years and so little seems to have changed; but instead of sweeping changes and overhauled systems, it is now far more balanced, playable and worthy of a paid release than anything we ever saw with the mod. The fact remains that *Natural Selection 2* is just as unique and innovative as the original ever was, and now's the time to get involved. There's something special here, you just need to look underneath all the copies of *Call Of Duty* to find it.





UNIQUE AND INNOVATIVE, BUT TOUGH FOR NEWBS



Above: The engine isn't perfect. In fact it's pretty bad, but the quality of the game still manages to shine through.

GEORGIA ON ITS MIND: A LOOK BACK AT TELLTALE'S BEST YEAR YET

The Walking Dead: Season One*

There are moments in Telltale's extraordinary vision of *The Walking Dead* which are some of the most powerful and resonant in any videogame this generation. Easily. Every single one of its five two-hour episodes contains gravitas, morality and tension comfortably on a par with its TV show companion, and so far in advance of most other videogames that it's almost shocking. This combination of point-and-click adventure, dialogue-driven drama and fleeting action game is a heartwrenching, beautifully constructed journey that quite simply has to be played.

Over the course of ten-or-so months, the Bay Area-based Telltale has produced a quintet of episodes based on Robert Kirkman's graphic novels, telling the new story of Lee, a 30-something Georgian man with an nebulous criminal past, and how he deals with the genesis of the zombie apocalypse. The bravery and intrigue begins with the opening scenes in the back of a police car where Lee is being taken to jail, and subtle cinematic techniques foreshadow what the audience already knows – things are about to go south. And we don't mean Atlanta.

Quickly, *The Walking Dead* establishes its flow. The DNA of Telltale is still threaded through the game, with its slow, thoughtful pace, puzzle-based sequences and dialogue trees, but the team has also introduced action elements to maintain a near constant state of threat. After Lee's police ride crashes, he has to escape the now zombified correctional officer by getting out of his handcuffs and grabbing his issue shotgun. It's all done through a point-and-click style cursor and keeps true interactivity to a minimum, but it's no less engaging, and perfectly suited to the form.

Shortly after, Lee meets young girl Clementine in an empty house, and saves her from a zombie attack. This pairing forms the central bond in *The Walking Dead*'s narrative. Much like the graphic novel and TV show, it's a story about the living characters far more than the dead, and the way writers Sean Vanaman and Jake Rodkin (both of *Idle Thumbs* podcast fame) have crafted this slightly uneasy but warm relationship is a credit to the restraint they both show as writers.

Some would perhaps argue that *The Walking Dead* isn't a game in the traditional sense, and it is true that there are long stretches of cutscene, QTE and less-than-

DETAILS

FORMAT: 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS3, Mac, iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: 400 Points per episode/2000 Points for the season
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

LABELLING TELLTALE'S THE WALKING DEAD IS REDUNDANT – EXPERIENCING IT IS WHAT MATTERS

FAQs

Q. WORTH PLAYING IN ONE GO?
Probably. The episodic structure works well, but it's good to have a sense of momentum also

Q. BEST CHARACTER?
For us, it's amiable geek Doug, who just happens to be one of the Telltale development team in real life.

Q. BETTER THAN THE TV SHOW?
It's not as slick a production, but in terms of pathos and emotional resonance, this pips it.

Below: The quality of the episodes ramps up as you progress, partly due to the escalating story, and partly thanks to the knowledge the team has picked up along the way. Laborious puzzle sections are streamlined, pointless traversal eliminated. By the end, the drama is faultless.

Right: At the end of each episode, you're given a breakdown of the major choices, and how other players in the world acted.

Below: It's a great ensemble cast, which steers away from classic archetypes and allows dialogue and drama to reveal character.



taxing puzzles. To think like this, though, is to miss the point. Labelling Telltale's *The Walking Dead* is redundant – experiencing it is what matters. The pure interactions might be limited, but it's about much more than that. The real meat of the game is found in the decisions you are constantly asked to make, whether it be taking sides in an argument, working out which order to carry out a task, or, most memorably, picking who might live or die.

Understanding both the gravity of these moments, and the speed at which the fiction requires them to be decided, is *The Walking Dead*'s finest achievement. It's a simple device – a timed bar that quickly depletes and makes a decision for you if you fail to make one yourself – but it cranks up the urgency to almost unbearable levels.

This isn't a game about right or wrong, either. Telltale isn't here to quantify your morality with skill points or facial scars. You simple make the choices and live with the consequences. It makes sure you know that the game is playing along, though, by informing you that characters will 'remember' your choices, or if they're 'offended' or 'pleased'. It's a device that probably caused many an argument in the Telltale offices, but one that's successfully implemented. Even though you're enthralled by the drama, it's important to feel reinforced that you are in control of what's happening. As much as you can be, anyway.

As the series continues, the drama gains even more weight, and the developers seem to gain in confidence. Early ropey action sequences are replaced by tight, exciting affairs in later episodes, and the writing goes from strength to strength, eliminating clutter and focusing on unrelenting storytelling. The fourth episode, penned by former games journo and current Hollywood screen writer Garry Whitta, is a tour-de-force, borrowing cinematic scriptwriting techniques and upping the pace and action to new levels.

It shows how well the episodic nature of development works, too. While not every game should be made this way, of course, the fact Telltale has the ability to improve the engine, introduce new mechanics and respond to player feedback has only helped enhance the project. Obviously, this is a team that has been working like this for many years, but its experience has never been so crucial.

For all its clear triumphs, it would be remiss to ignore *The Walking Dead*'s issues. There are moments where the drama does come to a standstill – a few laborious sections which hang on too tightly to developer's traditional point-and-click lineage. They're not too damaging, and are ironed out by the fourth and fifth episodes – another example of the benefits of this development style.

Also, the engine is not the strongest. It looks lovely while static, but is prone to jarring freezes and pops, which occasionally robs scenes of their dramatic potential. Hopefully the game's success will lead Telltale to investing in some more robust tech for the second season.

And there has to be a second season. The final moments are phenomenally powerful. It would be criminal to spoil any of this stirring and heartwrenching story, but this is a heady combination of artful writing and innate knowledge of the power of videogames to draw players into a character. It achieves things that passive artforms cannot. Jake Rodkin and Sean Vanaman have established themselves as game writers at the height of their powers, and *The Walking Dead* is unquestionably one of the videogames of the year.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GRAPHICAL FLAIR: The pseudo cel-shaded look is very similar to the graphic novels.
HARSH TIMES: It might look cartoony, but *The Walking Dead* does not shy away from extreme violence.

FORKS IN THE ROAD

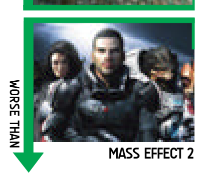
As early as the opening episode, *The Walking Dead* asks you to make life-and-death choices, which influence the rest of your playthrough. Where some games might cop out and present illusory decisions that ultimately result in the same outcome, there are myriad ways in which you can shape your own story. One major team member will be decided during the early stages, for example, resulting in a wildly different story. That the writers managed to keep on top of all of this, and deliver consistently satisfying outcomes, is to their tremendous credit.

BETTER THAN

DEAD RISING 2



WORSE THAN



MASS EFFECT 2

VERDICT 9/10

A BOLD AND BEAUTIFULLY CONSTRUCTED INTERACTIVE DRAMA

YOU SHALL NOT PASS. NOT DOWN THIS LANE, ANYWAY

Guardians Of Middle Earth

Below: You probably owe it to yourself to try out a MOBA, just to see what all the fuss is about. *Guardians Of Middle Earth* is a cracking starting point, with a lower-skilled community than *LoL* and a tidy tutorial.



Despite the rather grandiose licence, *Guardians Of Middle Earth* isn't remotely ashamed of what it's actually trying to be. This is a by-the-numbers, generic-by-definition multiplayer online battle arena, designed purely to give console gamers the kind of experience that has until now been the realm of the PC. This is *League Of Legends* or *DOTA 2* for console. The licence simply exists to lend the project credence.

If you're going to copy something, you should do it well, and that's exactly what former *FEAR* developer Monolith has done. There might not be an original bone in its body, but *Guardians Of Middle Earth* is nonetheless a supremely well-designed MOBA, one that plays by the rules of others without compromise.

You might be new to the genre, or curious about this new gaming rock and roll that has assaulted the industry with the force of Sauron's armies at Helm's Deep. *Guardians Of Middle Earth* is here for you. Through a quick and concise tutorial, it ploughs through the concepts of towers, soldiers, lords (or guardians, in this case), shrines and creatures, all of the stuff that will have the snootier *LoL* players yelling at you for not understanding if you dare step foot in that rather hostile world.

As this is a console experience, the community is both more forgiving, and generally of a lower average skill level, so you can dive in and get your head around its systems without feeling intimidated (or more accurately, like you're ruining someone else's fun). Grabbing hold of Gandalf or Gollum (you only play as a single character in a MOBA, essentially a multiplayer RTS played on very strict lane-based maps) and smashing through a platoon of enemy soldiers is surprisingly accessible. While you might die a little too regularly or sprint headlong into a few too many towers, every mistake is an opportunity to learn. No one starts off good at a MOBA. You just have to stick with it.

Whether *Guardians Of Middle Earth* will actually be around long enough to support that level of studiousness, though, is another matter. Even during release week, it regularly takes between five and ten minutes to get a game on 360, and quite often the teams of five will have to be padded out with a couple of AI bots. The worry that everyone who wants to play MOBAs is already playing them on PC must be a concern for Warner and Monolith.

Hopefully, though, *Guardians* will pick up pace as word gathers about its quality. Monolith has done great work in crafting a control scheme that feels completely without compromise and entirely suited to console, and has designed an accessible, familiar and extremely deep MOBA with just as much panache as the games it imitates.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Warner
DEVELOPER: Monolith
PRICE: 1200 Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-10
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



MISSING LINK

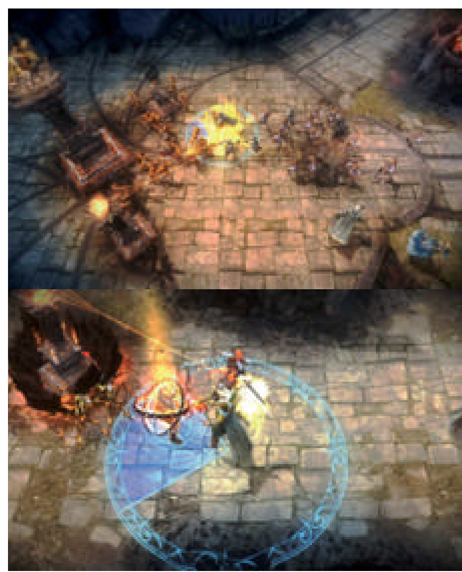
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

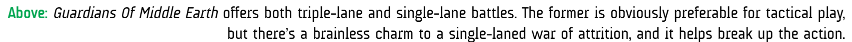
BORE-ON: The wait for a game can be lengthy, so having the ability to toy with loadouts and check character bios would be ideal. Instead, you just have to sit there.

VERDICT 8/10

A VERY FAMILIAR BUT SKILFULLY CONSTRUCTED CONSOLE MOBA







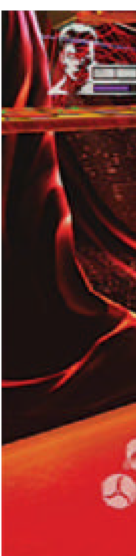
Above: *Guardians Of Middle Earth* offers both triple-lane and single-lane battles. The former is obviously preferable for tactical play, but there's a brainless charm to a single-laned war of attrition, and it helps break up the action.

YOU DON'T LEARN EACH LEVEL WITH INTIMACY BUT DMC ROCKETS FORWARD WITH A MOMENTUM NOT SEEN BEFORE IN THE SERIES

SWALLOW YOUR SOUL

Each level has Lost Souls dotted around, demanding exploration of the few nooks and crannies that exist, with an ethereal whispering making them easier to find. Even so, the levels are just about complex enough that finding them is a relatively tricky task, but they're still not the hardest to find. Secret challenges return and you need to find keys to unlock them. The presence of secret challenges themselves are not a huge surprise given *Devil May Cry* has previously featured hidden challenges but the difference is they now tie into your overall ranking. To run through *DmC* levels with the highest possible ranking, you need to be fast, take no damage, nail a high style rating and find all the Lost Souls and secret challenges. Tricky.







THE BEST EXAMPLE OF EAST MEETS WEST

DmC Devil May Cry*

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: Ninja Theory
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: 15 January
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Left: There are platforming sections breaking the game up and it's here that design is at its most abstract and ethereal.

What does *Devil May Cry* mean to you? Is it about learning the attack patterns of enemies and picking them apart with mastery of your own moveset? Is it about playing purely to see how long you can keep combos going and doing it with style? Is it about bosses that make you sit up before bunkering down for a long, intense battle? Is it about a brash arsehole with white hair?

Whatever *Devil May Cry* is about to you, *DmC* is a game that touches on all of those pillars. Yes, *all* of those things. Even the hair.

The big question mark was combat. Capcom has been clear in the marketing build-up to *DmC*'s release that it has had a big hand in overseeing the combat in Ninja Theory's game, bringing in Hideaki Itsuno from previous entries to guide this project along the right path. It was something said to try and calm the rabid fanbase still bubbling with rage over Dante's redesign but even if Capcom's involvement had never been pointed out, it is immediately obvious as soon as you start playing just how duties have been divided between the two developers.

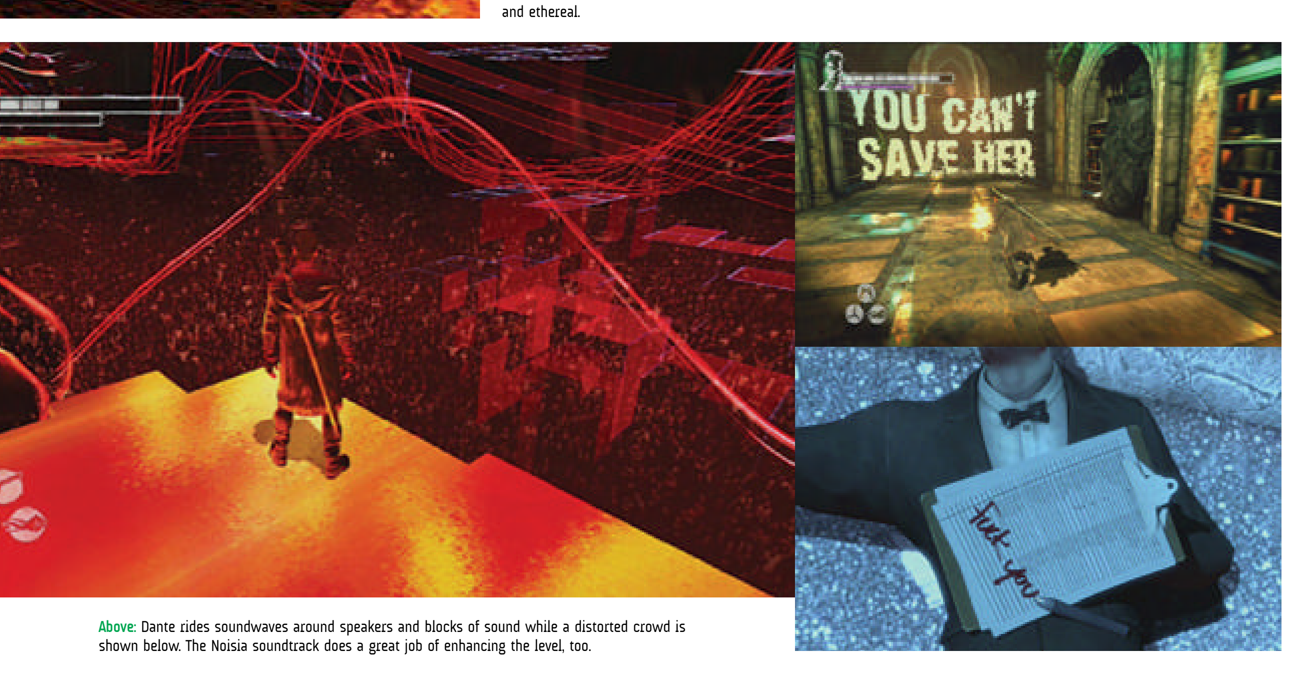
Combat is razor sharp and stuffed with combo potential, just as you'd expect from a *Devil May Cry* game. Dante has a regular human form where he can use his iconic Rebellion sword to whip demons into the air before juggling them with his Ebony and Ivory pistols. But he now has a blue angel form (quick but weak attacks) and red devil form (slow but powerful attacks) with their own weapons. Switching between forms is done by holding down the relevant shoulder buttons, which modifies Dante's moveset to fit his new form. It's not an immediately instinctive control system but given the need to switch between forms, it makes sense.

Devil May Cry veterans will have fun playing around with Dante's 'pull' moves, where he whips himself towards enemies or whips them

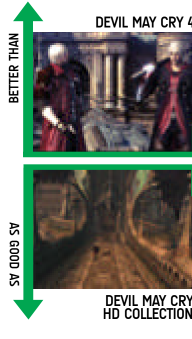
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

DODGE THIS: The lack of manual lock-on means Dante can't manoeuvre around opponents with the same precision as before thanks to the looser controls, making the dodge far, far more important.



Above: Dante rides soundwaves around speakers and blocks of sound while a distorted crowd is shown below. The Noisia soundtrack does a great job of enhancing the level, too.



Left: Swagger, middle fingers and swear words. Sometimes you feel the edgy side of Dante is pushed a little too much but those moments aren't as frequent as the initial trailers suggest.

towards him. It's the key to keeping combos going and also comes into play at smart spots in combat – you can nip around the back of bigger enemies and pull them to the ground for easy attacks as they scramble to recover, to give one example of many.

Even so, it's not Dante's pivotal skill in combat. Dodging might not be the flashiest move but it has become Dante's most important. Successfully dodging attacks at the last possible moment in Angel form grants Dante a healthy chunk of invincibility frames and it teleports him away from danger. Doing the same in Demon form powers up his subsequent attacks. Learning which dodge to use and when becomes a huge part of mastering *DmC*. It's not quite as tough as learning Royal Guard in previous games but it feels far more important.

There were understandable concerns that the lethargic response times that plagued combat in *Heavenly Sword* and *Enslaved*, or the simple enemies that could be cleared out with prolonged button-bashing, would carry over to this. Not so. This is a *Devil May Cry* game through and through and while there are Ninja Theory flourishes, such as a cinematic slo-mo angle for the final kill, there's nothing here that ever interferes with the core combat.

If the combat matches the high points of the series, then the art direction effortlessly surpasses it. *Devil May Cry* has always been seen as a stylish game but that style was told through Dante and Dante alone – his clothes, his attitude, his moves. Ninja Theory's Dante has the same sense of swagger and personality as he always has but it's the environments that really stand out, swapping riffs on gothic architecture for twisted nightclubs, collapsing cities, upside-down walkways and at one point, fighting inside a live news bulletin. Opinions about new Dante will likely rage on long after *DmC*'s release but the environments here show far more creativity and flair than any previous game in the series. Seeing the imagination on show is an unexpected treat and a surprising motivation to progress through the game.

It's not all combat in deliciously dark arenas, though. There are platforming sections, as Dante uses his push and pull moves to whip himself and obstacles around to leap his way onwards. There's not much room to get these sections wrong – push and pull prompts are pre-determined and there are no enemies to fend off while leaping about. They mostly exist to further show off the environments and change up the pace. Perhaps it's just as well. *DmC* is not a platforming game, Dante doesn't have much in the way of platforming moves and Ninja Theory is careful not to push the platforming beyond what Dante's moveset allows him to do.

It's an interesting contrast to how *Devil May Cry 3* broke up the combat with puzzle sections. There's nothing in *DmC* to rival the warrior trials or rotating towers in *DMC3*; Ninja Theory's take on Capcom's series is one that constantly moves forwards and rarely stops and as such, never takes the time to slow down for puzzles. You don't learn each level with the same intimacy as *Devil May Cry 3*

FAQs

Q. DO YOU UNLOCK WEAPONS AS YOU GO?

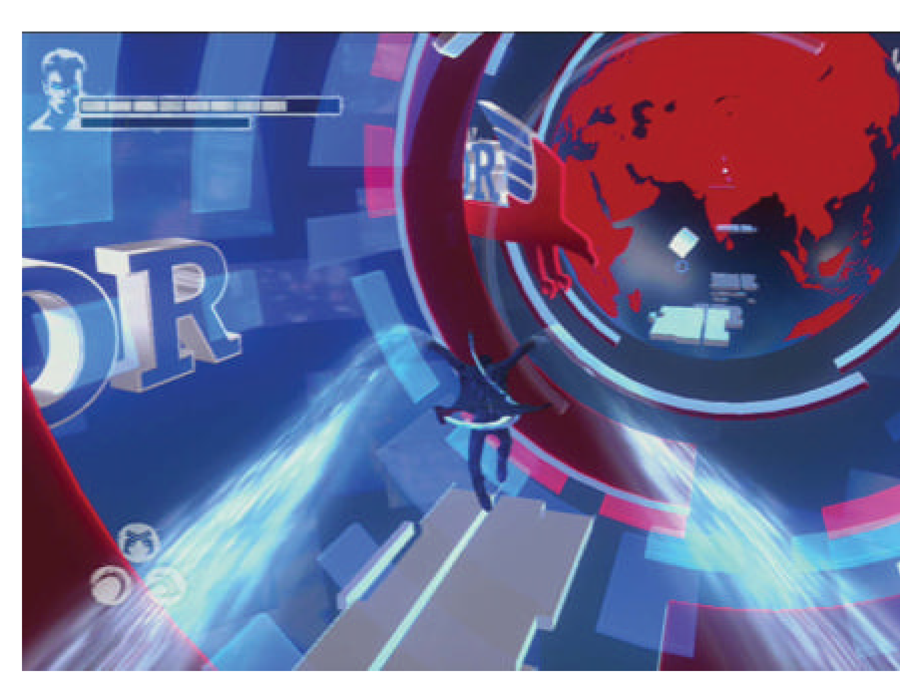
Yes. You unlock new weapons for the Angel and Demon forms, plus new guns. You can switch between them with the D-pad.

Q. HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO COMPLETE IN TOTAL?

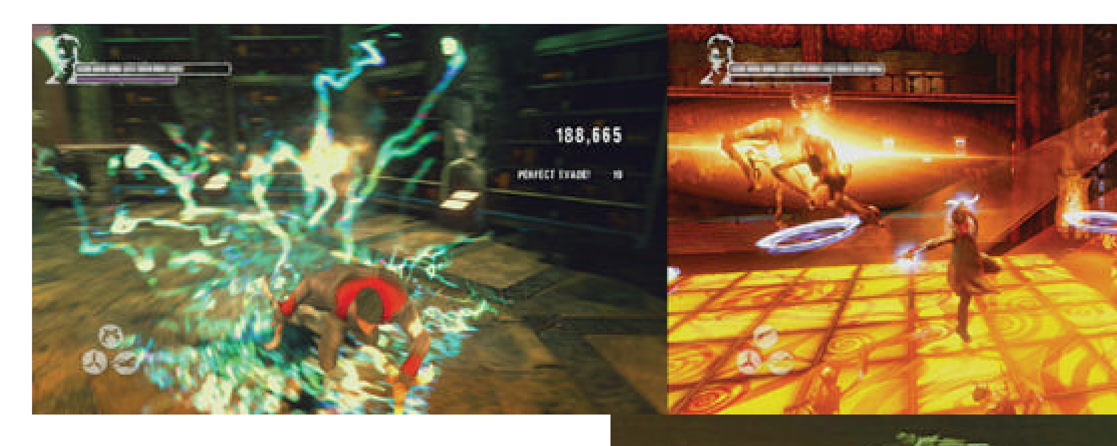
Around the ten-hour mark, depending on what difficulty you start on, though you won't find all the collectables.

Q. ANY UNLOCKABLES?

You can unlock extra skins for Dante including a version with – yes – his trademark silver hair right from the off.



Right: Ninja Theory not only matches *Devil May Cry*'s love of abstract design but pushes it as far as it will go.



Below: Successful dodges are marked with a splash of colour. They're essential on the harder difficulties.



Right: Dante's family drama is once again a strong theme, this time focusing on his relationship with his brother.

IF THE COMBAT MATCHES THE HIGH POINTS OF THE SERIES, THEN THE ART DIRECTION EFFORTLESSLY SURPASSES IT

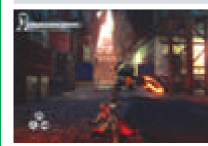
Below: Devil Trigger throws all the enemies into the air and leaves them helpless, as Dante races around to slice them all up. It's not as useful a tool as in previous games, especially when it comes to fighting bosses.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

20 MINS



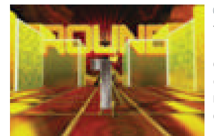
Getting to grips with Dante's moveset. Already the presentation stands out – the art direction, the music, the animation, it all *works*.

6 HOURS



You can now claim some sort of *DmC* mastery as you switch between the different forms and weapons on the fly.

5 DAYS



Still ploughing through on Dante Must Die. Learning when to dodge is key and some of the later battles are maddening on this difficulty level.

BOSS OF ME

Boss battles are usually the highlight of ***Devil May Cry*** games and ***DmC*** is no exception. Ninja Theory really let its imagination run wild with the design of the bosses, yet they still feel like old school observe-pattern-and-attack guardians with clear weaknesses to be exploited. None of them present themselves as particularly tricky obstacles on your first run through the game on the default difficulty. However, as with the previous ***Devil May Cry*** games, bosses also have a slightly different attack pattern as the difficulty increases although, in general, none feel quite as tough as previous games in the series. Well, bar one boss towards the end that we're not going to ruin…



forced you to with its twisting levels and love of backtracking but conversely, *DmC* rockets forward with a momentum not seen before in the series.

Besides the platforming, the other side of *DmC*, when you're not hacking away at demons, is the story. This has been billed as a prequel that explores Dante's origins but surprisingly, that arc is largely concluded as early as the second mission. The focus then switches to Dante versus Mundus and Dante's relationship with his brother Vergil, and *DmC* is a far stronger game for it. Dante is a cocky character but it's hard to imagine *DmC* being particularly compelling had the early missions seen him slowly unlock his powers. Instead, Dante has all his powers bar Devil Trigger granted within the opening missions, and the origins story has to be quick to keep pace with that. In any case, the relationship with Vergil is far more interesting given how the brothers have been portrayed in other games in the series.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

LOCK OFF: The lack of manual lock-on has upset some fans but it makes sense. It fits with the emphasis on dodging and encourages 'freestyle' combos in combat. It also makes *DmC* slightly easier to play.

Does story matter, though? It makes your first trip through *DmC* more enjoyable, certainly. While it's still a fantastical story involving giant demon babies and hellgates, it doesn't feel as absurd or ridiculous as previous *Devil May Cry* stories and there aren't any characters like Jester. It's a more involving tale, if not quite as fun. But ultimately, story is relegated to a background concern when you're playing through *DmC* again on Nephilim, Son Of Sparda or Dante Must Die difficulty. This is where the combat really shines and shows *DmC* truly belongs in Capcom's series, as you have to understand every move in your arsenal to dance and slice your way through the many enemies and bosses. If anything, default difficulty is a little easy and Dante Must Die isn't quite as fierce as it was in *Devil May Cry 3* but crank up the difficulty in *DmC* and it is very, very tough. It's at those higher difficulties where it truly comes alive. *DmC*, as with previous series entries bar *Devil May Cry 2*, is not a game you can bluff your way through.

Whether all this is enough to placate those frothing with rage at Dante's redesign and Ninja Theory's involvement remains to be seen. But regardless of what fans think about Dante's new look, there's no question the combat here is on par with the best the series has offered in the past, while the art direction surpasses the best the series has *ever* offered. If *Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City* showed us West meets East collaboration at its worst, *DmC* shows us that same partnership at its best. Capcom has brought its experience, Ninja Theory has brought its unique vision and the end result is an excellent game.

VERDICT 9/10

A TRUE DEVIL MAY CRY GAME IN EVERY SENSE

GO FOR THE IPAD, BOO, GO FOR THE IPAD!

Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition*

Right: The new areas look and feel like *Baldur's Gate II* sections, which could seem a little weird when played alongside the original locations. *BGII* used a whole different type of rendering, which explains the shift in style.

Picking holes in a proven classic is never a fun task. Nostalgia plays a large part in the adoration of long-forgotten gaming treasures, but this only makes the idea of replaying *Baldur's Gate* all the more unbearable. There's a sense of trepidation with every HD remake, franchise reboot or – in the case of Black Isle's most popular opus – enhanced editions, a numb fear that those classics we once idolised may actually not be up to snuff after all.

So consider this confirmation: *Baldur's Gate* remains the testament to RPG game design it ever was. But what of these 'enhancments'? Are they beneficial or do they sully the toil of the past? They come in a series of different tweaks, alterations and additions, primary among these being the new content. Three new characters, related quests and a separate mini-campaign add into the already overloaded wealth of content available and the former blends in with considerable skill. Each new character can be found throughout the campaign at some point and, mercifully, they're all fairly early on (*Baldur's Gate* enthusiasts, that means pre-Nashkel Mines). Neera is a Wild Mage and a favourite of the three, mixing a charming and humorous personality with an extremely unique approach to magic; Rasaad is a fist-fighter as the Monk class, while Dorn is a Blackguard warrior who uses magical abilities to enhance his already deadly combat skills. He's the evil equivalent of Minsc, basically.

Though none of the three new classes are truly unique to the series (only the Blackguard is, and even he is just an evil Paladin) they all provide something different; a kind of reward for your return journey through the Sword Coast. They're properly fleshed out characters too, more akin to *Baldur's Gate II* in terms of interaction while their bespoke quests will send you to brand new locations should you keep them around long enough. Credit to Beamdog for ensuring these additional characters are cohesive with the rest of the game.

Then there's the Black Pits. Segregated from the rest of the game, this added extra puts your team of six – either randomly chosen or hand-crafted by you – into fighting for their lives in a series of increasingly difficult arenas. The premise is intriguing enough and again the quality of the content is not in dispute, the problem is its repetitive nature. Outside of the conversations with NPCs, there's very little to see away from each new battle. Yet the rewards are vast and in the space of a couple of hours you could have a party of level eights all kitted out with trinkets and gear from across the main game. It's a challenge mode, then, and a fast-paced campaign that sees you rise through the levels with unnatural speed. Admittedly there's something compelling about the gruelling Black Pits, but it feels wasted as a separate part of the game entirely. There's no reason why this couldn't be amicably worked into the campaign as an end-game quest such as Durlag's Tower with very minimal dissonance.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: iPad
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Beamdog
DEVELOPER: Overhaul Games
PRICE: $19.99
RELEASE: 28 Nov 2012
PLAYERS: 1-6
MINIMUM SPEC: 512MB RAM, OpenGL 2.0 compatible graphics chipset, 1GHz CPU
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Right: It might not look like much, but a lot of effort has gone into the UI to ensure it both appears old and provides more functionality than ever. Good job, Beamdog.



Above: Neera is our favourite of the three new characters, but then that's probably because she reminds us a lot of Aerie from *Baldur's Gate II*. Her unique use of magic can make for some pretty interesting battles and last-ditch efforts, too.

Right: The old CGI cutscenes at important events have been replaced with 2D animations. They're plainly done, but won't age the game quite as much.

THERE'S PERHAPS NO BETTER (RE)INTRODUCTION TO THE CLASSIC RPG GENRE THAN BALDUR'S GATE: ENHANCED EDITION

FURTHER READING: THE FALLOUT BOYS | FEATURE | ISSUE 129 | PAGE 50




DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS
BETTER THAN
AS GOOD AS
BALDUR'S GATE

FAQs

Q. NEW CHARACTERS?
They're an interesting bunch, that's for certain. Well acted, plenty of content but mixed alignments make it hard to have all three at once.

Q. OLD CHARACTERS?
They're all here, present and correct. It's a testament to Black Isle's work that they still manage to evoke real personality still.

Q. IS IT HARD?
Yes. It's surprising to return to *Baldur's Gate* after all these years and find it such a challenge, but yes; you will need to relearn those skills.

TOUCH SCREEN THACO

With its cursor-heavy control it should perhaps come as no surprise to know that *Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition* works rather well on the iPad. There are concessions, naturally, such as dialogue selection or finicky pause-and-play but look at this sensibly: this is one of the best retro RPGs on your iPad and for £6.99 to boot. That's logic that's hard to ignore. This is part of Beamdog's future, too, and while it's not yet ready for the game's launch, features such as save syncing means you'll eventually be able to play on your PC then carry on with that same game on your iPad on the train. It's the future and the past all rolled into one.



That's it for new content, but elsewhere there have been a few nips and tucks. The reworked interface might not seem like much, but it's largely in the menus where it's more noticeable. The inventory screen now includes a number of additional details to help ease players into the ever-confusing world of THAC0. It's now easier than ever to see exactly how new equipment and weapons affect a character's combat prowess. Unfortunately it's not quite enough to quell *Baldur's Gate* notorious difficulty, however, and even the game's included tutorial doesn't do much to explain all the intricacies. In other words, if you're a newcomer, then prepare to spend more than a little bit of time researching the intricacies of the rather antiquated *D&D* Second Edition ruleset: plenty of depth, but more than enough complexity too. It's not a deterrent as such, but worth noting if you don't consider yourself an RPG genre devotee.

Other flourishes appear too, many of which are carried over from *Baldur's Gate II*: increased screen resolution, the ability to zoom, improved character models, item drop highlighting and new spells and effects to name a few. The visual upgrade is a minor one since the maps are still the originals, however a fantastic job has been done of adapting the game to larger screen sizes. Most impressive are the subtle tweaks throughout the game loot: don't worry, we're not talking overhauling the whole game, but even the most diehard of *Baldur's Gate* fans will consistently spot new elements or items as they play through once again. It's all done very subtly though, and that's the greatest achievement Beamdog should be praised for.

There are only minor concerns in the overall build of *Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition*. With only a couple of unexplained crashes, we had little to complain about, but there have been other issues noted by others online. While many of these are focused on multiplayer, others suggest bugs rather than crashes. In a bid to reach a target release date it seems Beamdog didn't run as strict a beta phase as it should've, but then perhaps there's no greater way to introduce a true classic to the modern era of videogames – rushed crunch time and post-release patches were less of a pain to endure back when *Baldur's Gate* was originally released.

Ultimately we should look at it this way: with *Wasteland 2* and *Project Eternity* on the horizon and the 'classic' RPG as a genre rising to prominence once more, you're going to need to get reacquainted with the isometric RPG and there's perhaps no better (re)introduction than with *Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition*.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TALES OF THE SWORD COAST: It's the inclusion of *Baldur's Gate II* elements that will interest most, enabling a wide variety of weapons and characters that were previously unavailable until the sequel.


VERDICT 9/10

LIKE WATCHING A HITCHCOCK BLU-RAY.



Left: There really isn't much to look at – it's certainly not a game made to dominate your attention for long periods of time. More just one to sit in the background, the screen being jabbed at every so often.

NOT THE KINGDOM OF THE CRYSTAL SKULL-LEVEL COCK UP WE EXPECTED

Uncharted: Fight For Fortune

SCE Bend has gone about this the wrong way – as the *Metal Gear* series showed us, the way to do it is this: strategic card-battling game first, handheld spin-off of the console version second. But the order is irrelevant when it comes down to it – just like *Metal Gear Acid* before it, *Uncharted: Fight For Fortune* is a card-battle spin-off of a popular PlayStation franchise. And it's not as weird as it sounds.

Anyone familiar with *Acid* – or *Magic: The Gathering* – will know what to expect with *Fight For Fortune*. Those unfamiliar will have to reconfigure their mind to accept a large amount of knowledge on how the game's systems work in a small amount of time, before being left to figure out the intricacies yourself. Those starting from a totally blank slate will have some learning to do, but through repeated play it soon becomes clear.

Using a random selection of cards (with more earned through beating opponents), you have to take down the opponent's health to zero. It's not as straightforward as it sounds, of course, with different cards having different offence, defence and support capabilities. Then there's the fortune cards – which can have status effects or award 'fortune' – and the resource cards, which operate as additional boosts and are purchased using said fortune. On top of that are other status effects and special combos (place Elena next to Drake, for example, to get a boost) and you have a fairly complex, interesting system. But it does have its issues.

For such a small game (a few hundred megs in size, little in the way of animation or sounds), it really is bizarre that it needs so many loading screens. Normally it wouldn't be much of an issue – a few seconds here and there – but it's just unnecessary and makes matches more sluggish than they should be. Which isn't something you want on a portable game being played in quick blasts.

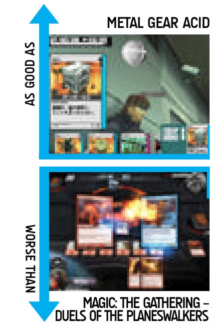
There's also a question when it comes to the AI of just *how* random things are. It may just be sour grapes, but it does at least *seem* the computer has the uncanny ability to pick out far better special cards than the player does. Online, of course, this isn't an issue – and that's where the game is at its best.

It's also where *Fight For Fortune* is at its most unbalanced and irritating. Numerous bonus systems are in place, rewarding those holding trophies from *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* with far stronger cards than those without. While a nice idea in theory, all it does in the game is make a select few players that are using this to their advantage super-powerful against the platinum-less plebs.

Overall *Uncharted: Fight For Fortune* is fun and for a low price will give plenty of hours to enjoy. But only if you can look past its relatively shallow nature, AI quirks and balance issues.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Sony Bend Studio
PRICE: £3.19
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

UNCHARTED, UNCHARTED: This isn't *Uncharted* as you know it from PS3 or even Vita – no new story, witty dialogue exchanges or all-out action. Just cards. Uncharted territory for *Uncharted*, no doubt.



ENGROSSING, FUN, LACKING, UNFAIR, CHEERFUL, UNCHARTED



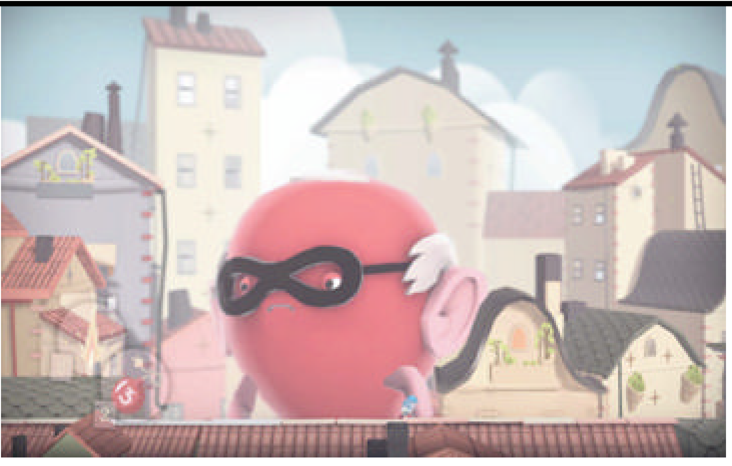
Above: Fans of the series might feel let down that there isn't any element of story to go along with the game, but to be honest it would have served absolutely no purpose.



FRUSTRATINGLY DELIGHTFUL

Pid





Above: Every boss in *Pid* is memorable. Often many times Kurt's size, they boast clever attack patterns that require a fair amount of head scratching to beat. It's a shame that *Pid's* difficulty makes these enchanting encounters more frustrating than they need to be.

Whimsical is the best way to describe Might & Delight's first game. From the moment you encounter protagonist Kurt as he jets off into space, you're drawn into one of the most fantastical game worlds of recent memory.

Sure, the textures aren't super detailed like you'd find in the latest triple-A release, but there's nevertheless a stunning beauty to *Pid*'s imaginative art design that gives it an almost ethereal, dreamlike quality. The odd looking characters you encounter look like they've been unearthed from a lost Pixar flick, while *Pid*'s levels alternate between gorgeous looking cityscapes and giant oversized rooms. The same imagination has infused *Pid*'s bosses, with many of them looking like they've leapt, stomped or crawled directly out of the fertile mind of Terry Gilliam.

And yet, while Might & Delight has managed to create a wonderfully lush canvas for Kurt to play on, they've given him the clumsiest of tools with which to enjoy it. There's a floatiness to Kurt, which, while keeping in with the dreamlike world he inhabits, proves extremely irksome when you're trying to navigate *Pid*'s tough platforms. Collision detection feels incredibly unfair with the slightest touch causing Kurt to fall foul of *Pid*'s many dangerous traps.

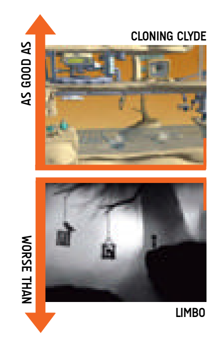
Pid's core mechanics revolve around Kurt's ability to shoot beams of light from his hands, which shoot out energy in various directions. Kurt can then float on these beams and have two activated at any one time. Coupled with a selection of traditional power-ups, ranging from bombs to slingshots, this allows Might & Delight to create some truly devious, and often unfair, puzzles. The problem however is that said puzzles appear far too often, and while some of them are truly inspired, you'll often find yourself immediately working out a puzzle as soon as you enter a room and then having to go through the motions as you complete it. It's a chore, particularly when you have to do it again and again in a short space of time.

This in itself is a real pity, as *Pid* for the most part is extremely slick and a very well designed game in places, particularly when it comes to the many bosses you encounter throughout Kurt's surreal adventure. As deadly to defeat as they are odd to look at, they boast complex attack patterns and are satisfying to beat, they also remind you of *Pid*'s unfair difficulty however, as those floaty controls mean you're often at the complete mercy of projectiles that can often prove near impossible to avoid.

You keep plugging away though, because there's a quaint charm to Might & Delight's game that easily allows you to look past its bland puzzles and insane difficulty spikes. An enjoyable, if rather frustrating debut that could have benefited from a little more development time.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Mac
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Might & Delight
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: OS: Windows XP SP2, Processor: 2.6 GHz single core, Memory: 1Gb, Hard disk space: 2Gb, Video Card: DirectX 9.0 compatibility
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



FINGERPRINT

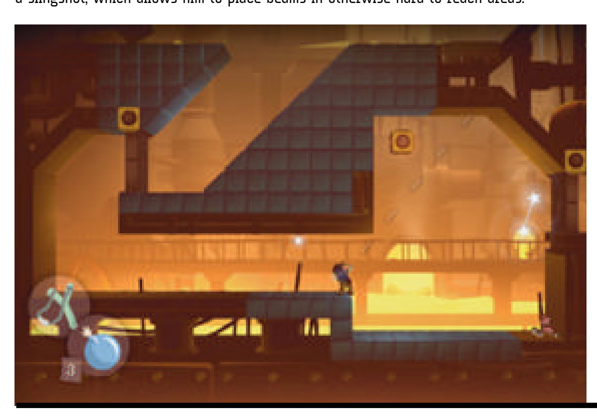
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

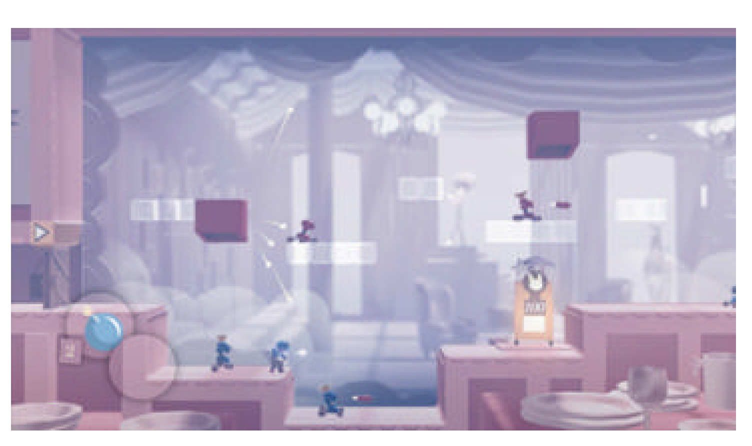
BEAM ME UP – Kurt's ability to shoot and float on beams of light is an excellent touch, allowing for some clever puzzles. The puzzles cleverly evolve as Kurt's journey continues as well.



A GORGEOUS GAME, BUT AN EQUALLY FRUSTRATING ONE

Below: In addition to his trusty light beams, Kurt also has access to various other useful items. Bombs, timed and otherwise, are available, and Kurt eventually gets his hands on a slingshot, which allows him to place beams in otherwise hard to reach areas.







YOU'D HAVE TO BE AS DRUNK AS LEMMY TO ENJOY THIS ONE

Ace Of Spades

***Ace Of Spades* was a much-loved, free indie project in its life as a beta.** It saw teams facing off against each other in a strategic First World War battle of digging, tunnelling, building and fortifying. It had its share of problems, but it was good fun – an enjoyable game with a distinctive visual style and the sort of thing that deserved a bigger audience to take part; for more people to simply pay attention.

So it was that the news Jagex had picked *Ace Of Spades* up for distribution was greeted with relative joy: with more money behind it, the game could be built up as much as those bridges you spent 20 minutes crafting in the warzone of the beta. It would be able to reach its potential. Unless, of course, somebody along the line in the decision-making process had the all-too-idiotic idea to almost entirely neuter what it is that made the beta so captivating, stripping *Ace Of Spades* of much of what made it so much fun in the first place and leaving a shallow, cynical husk of a game to be released to a much larger public audience.

Guess what happened? Please do guess, really – because we haven't the foggiest. If Jagex didn't have a hand in utterly crippling *Ace Of Spades* we would be *very* surprised. If the change in focus from strategy, thought and drawn-out battles to boring, superficial and incredibly brief skirmishes was a decision on the part of the game's actual developers we would be even *more* surprised. Because they were onto a good thing with the beta releases: *Ace Of Spades* v1.0 has hardly anything of interest about it and is, in fact, a thoroughly pointless release.

The quickest – and laziest – way to describe *Ace Of Spades* would be to use the marketing line of: *Team Fortress 2* meets *Minecraft*. It's team-based, class-focused combat with elements of digging, mining and building thrown into the hat. Classes go four deep, with the vanilla commando offering the minigun or rocket launcher you would expect, along with massive inaccuracy and no other perks whatsoever. The marksman – sniper to some – wields a sniper rifle that remains ever-steady and often kills in one hit, rendering them overpowered in half-competent hands. The miner has the potential to be a very interesting class, emphasising his ability to dig quicker and hold more blocks with which to build over his combat abilities, but the way most games play out – pitched battles with no thinking involved – makes him a fringe selection in the majority of modes. Finally there's the rocketeer: able to leap huge distances with a jetpack that recharges in seconds and a machine gun that hits with far greater accuracy than any other quick-firing weapon in *Ace Of Spades*. Some might call him overpowered – we would agree. This imbalance among just four character classes

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: United States
PUBLISHER: Jagex
DEVELOPER: Ben Aksoy, Mathias Kærlev
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-32
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, 2.0 GHz, 2 GB RAM, Nvidia Series 8800+ or ATI Radeon HD 3000, DirectX 9.0, 350 MB HD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Right: The *Minecraft* influence borders on outright plagarism, and with the game lacking in quality as it does just serves as an insult to the incredible legacy Mojang's game has left on the world of indie gaming.



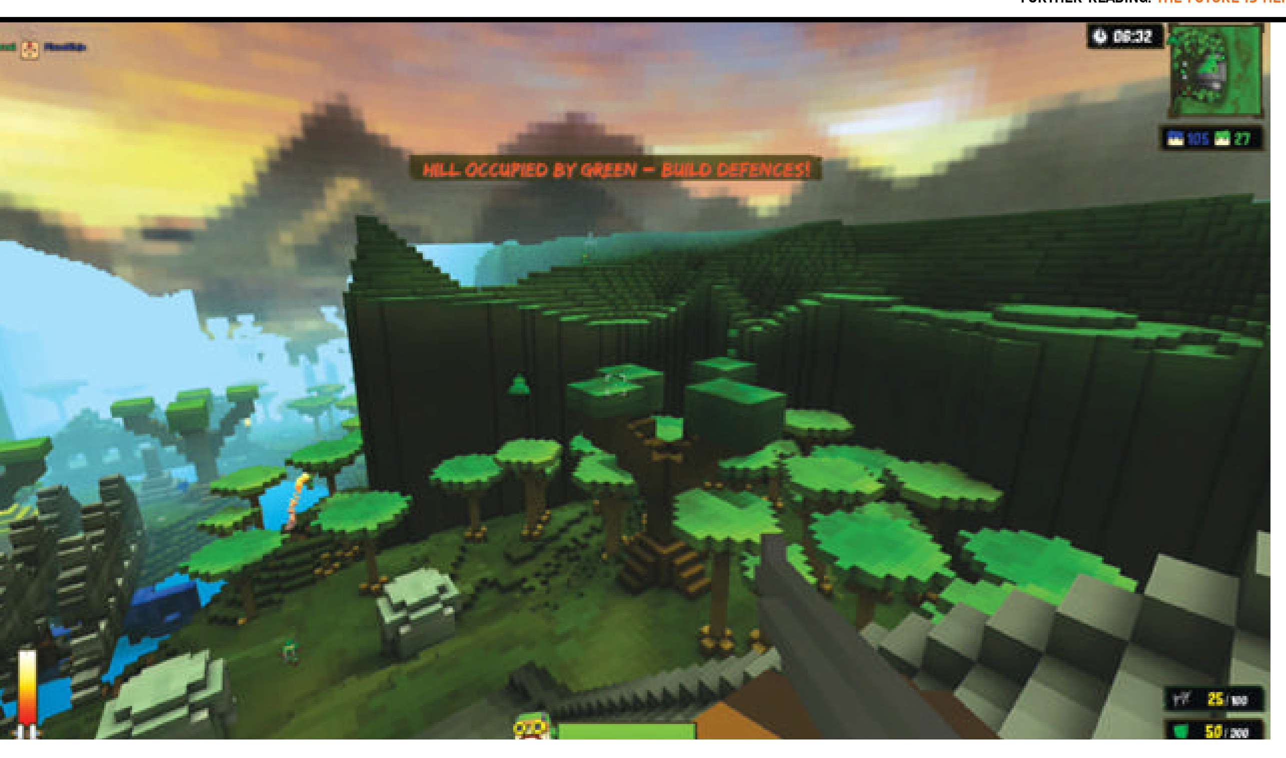
Above: Gone are the procedurally-generated levels of the beta, replaced with a small selection of lifeless, uninteresting maps. One of them has a dragon on it though, and another one has a decent-looking castle. So at least there's that.

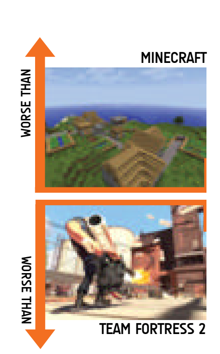


Right: Stand-up fights often come down to one of two factors: whoever has the best connection (usually Americans) and which of the two is playing as either a marksman or rocketeer. It's not exactly, if you'll excuse the pun, rocket science.

IT'S IRONIC THAT A GAME OFFERING THE PLAYER SO MANY CHANCES TO DIG BENEATH ITS SURFACE IS SO INCREDIBLY SHALLOW

FURTHER READING: THE FUTURE IS HERE | FEATURE | ISSUE 130 | PAGE 22





FAQs

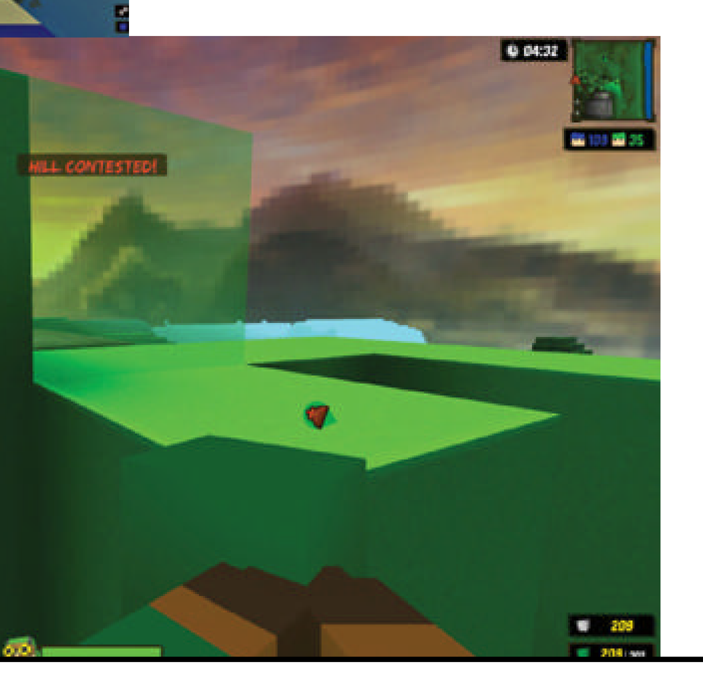
Q. SURELY IT'S WORTH £7?
The price is a positive, no doubt, but there are far better experiences like the free-to-play *Team Fortress 2*.

Q. WHAT CAN I BUILD?
Theoretically anything, but in practice the system is too cumbersome and slow to be able to construct anything of worth.

Q. IS THE BETA GONE?
Officially, yes – the version of *Ace Of Spades* that was actually good fun has been turned off.

IF YOU BUILD IT...

You can build anything you want in *Ace Of Spades*, so long as you can form it with the blocks your characters can collect from mining/digging. Oh, and as long as you're able to complete it in ten minutes and can avoid it being attacked by 31 other players lobbing explosives around at all times. Of course, the aim of the game isn't to build a replica of the Starship Enterprise, but it would be nice to be able to construct bespoke, useful structures in the heat of battle, instead of relying on a few half-useful templates. Alas, all you can do is start placing ten blocks down haphazardly before some idiot with a grenade ruins what little creative fun you were having.



is something that might not feel so pronounced were it a game that rewarded more than just the ability to kill and move across maps quickly, but – as mentioned – this is not the game it was previously.

The fact that 99 per cent of battles almost instantly descend into a maelstrom of explosions, destruction and confusion would likely be a boon to many other games, but in *Ace Of Spades* it really just makes the whole experience feel pointless. The main chunk of confusion comes from how levels are almost entirely destructible: in part because you can end up unsure of where you might supposed to have been going, but also because it's an element players – understandably – want to mess about with. What does this mean? Explosives everywhere, rockets fired at everything, people destroying for absolutely no reason other than to destroy, *people simply not playing the game*. Then, of course, there's the lag that never seems to go away, just adding to the confusion – we tested an empty map on a 50Mb cable line only to see disconnection warnings for a flaky connection. That's just not good enough.

While there are modes beyond the usual king of the hill/team deathmatch setups, we were hard pressed to find many – if any – games that took in the likes of zombie mode (avoid the spreading infection as long as possible – get killed, become a zombie) or diamond mine (mine for diamonds, take them to a set point to cash in for points). All the same, they're not exactly the sorts of additional play modes that could save the experience from being utterly dull and lacking any real spark in the most part.

Ace Of Spades could end up being a fine example of modern videogaming – and the problem faced by those attempting to offer balanced critique. It could, over the coming weeks, months and years, see its problems fixed. It could see balance issues tweaked, the introduction of more interesting classes, more of a focus on building and strategy – a return to the beta roots, of sorts – and patches upon patches to make it the game it should have been from day one.

But right now, the game we have and the game we are reviewing... well, it's not a good one. We can't rely on the potential for issues to be fixed or what could (or should) have been – we can only go with what's right in front of us. And what's right in front of us is *Ace Of Spades* as it stands: a mishandled, mangled release. It's ironic that a game offering the player so many chances to dig beneath its surface is so incredibly shallow.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

TEAM MINECRAFT 2: It's an easy comparison to make, but *Ace Of Spades* should not be placed alongside the mighty *TF2* or *Minecraft*. It's simply in a different, far worse, class all of its own.

VERDICT 4/10
CAN'T DIG ITSELF OUT OF THIS HOLE

EVERYONE WANTS A GAME TO SHOW OFF THEIR NEW SYSTEM. THIS ISN'T IT

Warriors Orochi 3 Hyper

Below: The duel mode is less of a glitchy horror show than the single-player campaign, but it's seriously lacking in depth. If you're after a fighter for your brand new Wii U, then *Tekken Tag Tournament 2* is surely the only way to go.



The popularity of the *Warriors* games has always been somewhat baffling. Clearly, they're technically archaic, almost devoid of subtlety or any real skill, and thrown together with such regularity as to almost blend into one another. Yet they keep getting made, and people keep buying them.

Warriors Orochi 3 Hyper, already released on Xbox 360 and PS3 without the *Street Fighter*-style subtitle, is probably the best of this enormous series, managing to cram 120 playable characters into its mess of demon slaying and army annihilating. And, despite the obvious shortcomings, there is a kind of baseline catharsis in smacking thousands of idiotic enemies to death, probably because it doesn't take itself as seriously as *Dynasty Warriors*.

Unfortunately, it's hard to remain cheery when the Wii U port is so dreadful. The series has never been a graphical showcase, and has always relied on fairly cheap fade-in tricks when displaying its sizeable enemy armies. Here, though, it's rendered almost unplayable by the fact baddies will blink in and out of view right in front of you, as will your team-mates. It's a disgrace, quite frankly. Divorced of context, treated as a standalone title, *Warriors Orochi 3 Hyper* is probably the most technically moribund game since *Driv3r*.

Not only is it extraordinarily difficult to work out what's going on, as enemies flicker in and out of view mere inches from your player character, the resolution and frame-rate are considerably worse than the 360 and PS3 versions. This isn't a case of Wii U lacking in power, it's just a bad port. There are already games on the machine vastly more visually impressive than the original *Warriors Orochi 3*. There really is no excuse for releasing something in this state.

If you can turn off all your critical faculties and just concentrate on the endless thud of spear or sword on enemy flesh, then *Warriors Orochi 3 Hyper* is just about enjoyable for an hour or so. Of course, almost anything on Wii U gets novelty points at the moment too for being playable on the Gamepad. It's definitely superior to some crowbarred-in touch screen features, and hopefully more developers will just follow suit and let you play their games on the world's most powerful handheld (albeit one you can't really take beyond your sofa).

If you can stomach the campaign, there are plenty of characters to get through and some amusing combinations of powers to unleash on the hordes, and a duel mode lets you tackle a friend in one-on-one competition, but when it's this much of a technical mess, it's hard to drum any real enjoyment out of it. This is the worst kind of launch title – a rushed, ugly and cynical port of a game that wasn't particularly special in the first place. Avoid.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DONT' BLINK: No-one's asking for a *Warriors* game to look like *Far Cry 3*, but it's surely not an unreasonable request to at least have the characters not blip out of existence right in front of you, surely.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Tecmo Koei
DEVELOPER: Omega Force
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: FUZION FRENZY 2



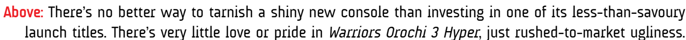
WORSE THAN: WARRIORS OROCHI 3

VERDICT 3/10

UGLY, RUSHED AND NASTY. THE WII U DESERVES BETTER.







Above: There's no better way to tarnish a shiny new console than investing in one of its less-than-savoury launch titles. There's very little love or pride in *Warriors Orochi 3 Hyper*, just rushed-to-market ugliness.

Inset: You won't get any one-shot kills here. It's true it takes a while to defeat an enemy, but that's a necessity; smart use of your abilities will see you survive even the toughest odds (especially when playing as an Assassin).

LESS MMO AND MORE MO

Forge

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Dark Vale Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: 4 December 2012
PLAYERS: 1-24
MINIMUM SPEC: CPU Dual Core 2GHz, 2GB RAM, 512GB GPU, 6GB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



You may have spotted this on Kickstarter: the MMO PvP game that takes away the MMO. If you think *World Of Warcraft*'s Battlegrounds but without the grinding in between then you're probably somewhere close to what *Forge* is. It's much more action-focused than any MMO's PvP gameplay and the RPG elements are all but cast aside in the name of balanced gameplay. All five classes – built around the videogame staples we've come to expect – have every ability available from the start. There's no unlocking required or careful skill tree management: a risky move but one that pays off, rewarding skill in battle much more than number-crunching.

Each class has a unique playstyle, whether it's the long-range Pathfinder, the stealthy Assassin or tank-like Warden. Though the abilities differ, there's always a counter to help you react to a situation. Everyone has their own unique movement ability, for example, each taking a little time in the training ground to get to grips with.

You'll need to understand your chosen class, too, though you might need any of the eight abilities. This is a fast-paced game and you'll need the reactions and knowledge if you're to win. That shouldn't put anyone off, however, because if you do your part, play as a team and know what skills are open to you there's no stopping you. Few games offer a multiplayer game this involving and rewarding.

Subtle touches highlight the MMO influence too. Icons zoom into your cursor as their countdowns finish meaning you won't need to constantly check when your go-to skill is available again. Maps are smartly designed with a decent amount of variety and verticality to them, and though games of Team Deathmatch can unfairly result in spawn-camping there's often a pleasant flow to each game.

But then this touches on our initial point. For as unique and thrilling *Forge* is, there are a handful of concerns. Key-binding doesn't seem to work properly – which is important in a game reliant on quick reactions – while the heavy focus on ranged combat, poor implementation of different game modes and an uninspired levelling up system are all minor concerns. All that will change, however: already new maps and characters are planned and the inevitable tweaks and patches to make *Forge* even more compelling will arrive sooner rather than later. This isn't the full game, but will it ever be? It's a fantastic multiplayer game that is genuinely unique; get in early and you could be the part of something big.

BETTER THAN
GUILD WARS 2



WORSE THAN
WORLD OF WARCRAFT

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GO QQ ELSEWHERE: Why it wasn't thought of sooner we don't know, but *Forge*'s skilful recreation of just the PvP matches of an MMO has more than enough depth to outlast its novelty.

VERDICT 8/10

A BLAST TO PLAY, EVEN BEFORE THE INEVITABLE FIXES

A BIT LIKE THE EIGHTIES: UNDENIABLY NAFF, AND YET SOMEHOW STILL COOL

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City 10th Anniversary Edition

One of gaming's greatest charms has to be cruising down Ocean Beach, watching an orange-purple sunset cast across the sea, with the sounds of Luther Vandross smoothly pulsing from your car radio. If the *Vice City* ten-year anniversary edition gets anything right, it's commendably capturing that sensation once again in iOS form. Why anyone would want to utilise the imbedded iTunes functionality and build their own radio station is beyond us – *Vice City* is about the music, the setting and the atmosphere, and it's impressive to see Rockstar's team has kept its celebration of neon Eighties excess intact here.

Unfortunately, everything that takes place within that location is less deserving of high praise. The core problem with *Vice City* on iOS is the control scheme, which hasn't been suitably upgraded since last year's *GTA III* anniversary edition. Steering is as difficult as ever and precision shooting is once again a mess, with the auto aiming system turning into a nightmare when all hell breaks loose and you find yourself killing more civilians than police or bad guys. Mucking about in the open world is fun enough, but when you're trying to carefully fly a remote control helicopter through a building site – which was difficult enough even in the PS2 version – your patience can very quickly run dry.

We're sure it's entirely possible to make a *GTA* game perfectly suited to the touch screen – just look at *Chinatown Wars* for evidence of that. Instead we're getting these forced ports, with *GTA* shoehorned onto a system that simply doesn't support it as well as Rockstar clearly thinks it does.

Nostalgia is the main thing *Vice City 10th Anniversary Edition* has going for it, but aside from that the experience would have fared far better on hardware such as Vita. Like *GTA III* before it, and the inevitable ten-year anniversary release of San Andreas in 2014, this is intriguing proof of concept, but a let down when it comes to execution. But still… Luther Vandross.

DETAILS

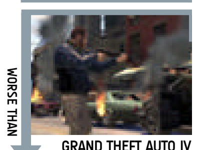
FORMAT: iPad
FORMAT REVIEWED: iPhone
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Rockstar Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £2.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

GRAND THEFT AUTO III: 10 YEAR ANNIVERSARY EDITION



WORSE THAN



GRAND THEFT AUTO IV



NOT AN IDEAL MATCH FOR THE HARDWARE

Below: We're calling it now – *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* has one of the best videogame soundtracks ever. It's a sonic celebration of Eighties culture, and the perfect backdrop to the neon stripped streets of Rockstar's greatest creation.



ZOMBIE GAME NO. 21,334

The Walking Dead: Assault

DETAILS

FORMAT: iPad
OTHER FORMATS: iPhone
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Gamagio
DEVELOPER: Skybound
PRICE: £1.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Below: There are some light RPG elements, with the supplies used to upgrade your team's health, damage, ammo capacity and adrenaline (cool-down rate).

What makes *The Walking Dead* such a successful series is the emotional impact it derives from real human drama; it was certainly that aspect of the franchise that saw Telltale Games' take on the comic book scoop Game Of The Year at last year's VGAs, after all. However, *The Walking Dead: Assault* – a top-down shooter developed by Image Comics imprint Skybound – flouts such narrative complexity and relies solely on the headshots and brain trauma side of the zombie equation.

Each chapter tells an extremely truncated version of one of the comic book chapters, conveyed via a monochrome colour palette highlighted with occasional splashes of crimson. Your objectives are simple, and rarely change: kill all the zombies on the map while collecting as many supplies as possible.

To navigate, you double-tap to move a single character or hold your finger to order them to move in a group. The characters will fire automatically when a walker enters their radius, the size of which will depend on the firearm they're carrying and its range. Character selection can be a pain, however, meaning you'll often rely on the team working well as a group rather than singling out characters to work on a specific task.

That's not to say there isn't strategy. A noise meter will summon a ravenous horde when filled, meaning you must be tactful with your use of firearms and often rely on your less powerful but quieter melee weapons. Further strategy comes in each character's special ability; a limited use power that can range from one-shot-kill headshots to an ability to remain undetected by your enemies. These active abilities, along with passive abilities such as endowing your team with greater speed, make team selection prior to each chapter an interesting process.

Nevertheless, *The Walking Dead: Assault* fails to shake things up, with the odd optional objective doing little to convince that this game is about anything more than shooting a lot of reanimated corpses. But perhaps it's too much to ask for any of the series' subtler emotional impact from a top-down shooter on the iPad.





BRAINLESS, BUT FUN



Left: Some familiar faces do show through *Q-Force*'s five levels, just don't expect to be able to interact with them in any meaningful way.

IS TEN YEARS TOO LONG FOR SONY'S LOVABLE LOMBAX?

Ratchet & Clank: Q-Force

Ratchet & Clank: Q-Force marks the tenth anniversary of Insomniac's much-loved platformer. But instead of using this release to celebrate everything that has come before, *Q-Force* instead dives into new territory, offering up an action/tower defence hybrid that fails to capture much of what made the series so enjoyable to begin with.

Ten years and ten games later, it's no surprise that Insomniac would want to inject some diversity into the series. Sadly, the elements that have largely come to define *Ratchet & Clank* have been left on the cutting room floor. The colourful characters and wide-eyed humour are relegated to a handful of cutscenes, with weapon progression and platforming an afterthought.

After a mysterious villain begins invading peaceful planets, Ratchet joins forces with Clank and Captain Qwark to become the aforementioned Q-Force, to defend the galaxy from alien threats. Hopping between the three available planets, you're tasked with clearing up the enemy presence while establishing further planetary defences.

As soon as your hoverboots hit the ground, an exhausting race begins to scour the maps for weapons and bolts (the in-game currency) which you can in turn use to buy defences for your base. Sadly, exploration is a chore, as clumsy level design and repetitive hack-and-slash gameplay punctuate every turn.

The problem comes down to balance, or the lack thereof. Turrets and barriers are expensive to build, but the enemy are unrelenting. By the fourth map, of five available, it quickly becomes apparent that there simply aren't enough bolts to properly fortify your position, or enough ammunition to defend against the onslaught of overwhelming enemies.

The hallmark of a good tower defence game is one that forces you to split your time and resources between offensive and defensive capability. Sadly, Insomniac hasn't provided the tools to manage both simultaneously, *Q-Force* is simply missing many of the design nuances of its peers.

While single-player is disastrous in execution, the multiplayer does act as somewhat of a saving grace. Tight online matches play out in either 1v1 or 2v2 scenarios, with reworked maps and resource management allowing for greater planning and execution. Matches are split into three phases: recon, squad and action. The recon phase lets you duke it out over resource nodes, which in turn gives you bolts to purchase units to aid in the assault of the enemy base, and defence of your own. It has a genuinely fun pace about it, and hints at an ambition that Insomniac wasn't able to replicate in the single-player experience.

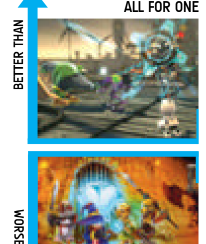
You have to admire Insomniac for trying to breath life into an aging series, but after the disappointment of *All 4 One*, followed by the patchwork monster of *Q-Force*, it's becoming all the more apparent that the studio may have misplaced the heart of the series.

DETAILS

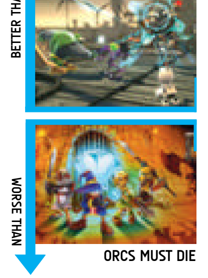
FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation Vita
ORIGIN: America
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Insomniac Games
PRICE: £15.00
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

RATCHET & CLANK: ALL FOR ONE



WORSE THAN



ORCS MUST DIE

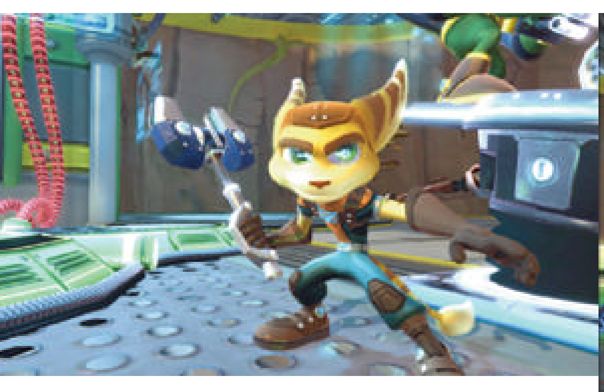
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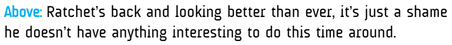
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BOTS PLEASE: Clank and Captain Qwark spend most of the game sat stationary on turrets. If they could join you in the field, exploration might not feel like such a slog.



A DISAPPOINTING ENTRY INTO THE TEN-YEAR LEGACY





Above: Ratchet's back and looking better than ever, it's just a shame he doesn't have anything interesting to do this time around.



IT WOULDN'T BE A CONSOLE LAUNCH WITHOUT MINIGAMES, WOULD IT?

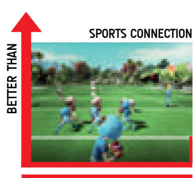
Rabbids Land

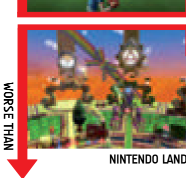
DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

SPORTS CONNECTION





NINTENDO LAND

WORSE THAN

Everything about *Rabbids Land* feels like a ugly hangover of the Wii's darker side. It's a hastily put together collection of minigames, wrapped up in a mediocre board game and drenched in those mischievously miscreant Rabbids, like a sleight-of-hand flash masking a simple card trick. Ironic, too, considering the Rabbids themselves debuted on the Wii, when that console felt fresh and filled with possibility and potential.

That's exactly what the Wii U actually is in early 2013, so it's almost depressing to wade through a game of *Rabbids Land* when you know the machine is capable of so much – as the marvellous *Nintendo Land* has already proven. The formula is stripped from *Mario Party* – you and three other Rabbids take it in turns to roll a dice and move around a small board, where you might then land on a minigame, a quiz question, an event that drops something onto the board itself (perhaps a jester that steals trophies, or a trophy itself) or a trophy-stealing skull and crossbones.

The winner must get ten trophies and return to the middle of the board, like Trivial Pursuit without the class. Trophies are, of course, won by competing in the various minigames, which use both the gamepad and connected Wii Remotes, but without any real purpose. Frustratingly, and shockingly, the minigames only ever support two players at a time, so even if you do muster up a four-person party, half of you will be sat watching for 100% of the game time. And the minigames themselves are fairly weak – there's nothing here that's not been seen on the DS, from weak touch-screen tapping, line drawing and gyroscope steering.

There's just nothing here that truly takes advantage of the Wii U's capabilities, which is a shame. Nothing that operates like *Nintendo Land*'s marvellous Mario Chase, for example, where the Gamepad holder has their own private screen, offering a view into the game world that's completely unique and genuinely impossible on any other system. In essence, *Rabbids Land* is a Wii minigame collection crowbarred onto the Wii U.

That said, though, it's still reasonably enjoyable in the right circumstances. Unlike most cynical minigame collections, everything here works and rarely outstays its welcome, even if it is all lacking in inspiration. Also, the pure functionality of the overarching board game is well executed, with enough back-and-forth and the potential to stitch up your opponents always hanging over proceedings.

A shame, then, that *Rabbids Land* feels so lacklustre when put side by side with its Nintendo-themed compatriot. There's nothing here that can possibly justify the high price tag, and anyone after some family fuel for the post-Christmas haze need look no further than the big N's collection of genuinely innovative multiplayer gems. The Rabbids just aren't big enough to get on this particular ride.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FOUR MORE: Having the minigames only built for two players is a shocking idea, and is almost baffling for a family game. You spend so long sitting around doing nothing.



Above: While it's almost devoid of genuine inspiration, *Rabbids Land* is solid enough to provide a few laughs. At full price, though, that's not really enough, especially when half your party is not able to play. And of course, never play it on your own.







Above: Most of the budget seems to have gone on a lavish CG intro and a needless (but amusing) character selection screen where you dip your Rabbid into your coloured paint of choice. The minigames themselves feel cheap and old fashioned.



VERDICT 5/10
A POOR CONCEPT, DELIVERED MODERATELY

LIKE UP, BUT WITH FEWER TALKING DOGS

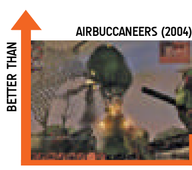
AirBuccaneers

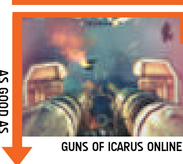
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: LudoCraft
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99 (€14)
RELEASE: 5 December 2012
PLAYERS: 1-32
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.6 Ghz Single Core CPU, 2GB RAM, DirectX 9 Compatible GPU
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

AIRBUCCANEERS (2004)





GUNS OF ICARUS ONLINE

AS GOOD AS

The more things change, the more they stay the same. That's what they say, and consider this: in 2004 we were beginning to reach the end of a console cycle, interest in the industry was waning and PC gaming – more specifically the creations of indies and modders – were becoming more and more interesting to gamers looking for something new. *AirBuccaneers* – the original mod for *Unreal Tournament 2004* – offered that something new, outside of the big budget tried-and-tested games available on consoles. Sound familiar?

So here we are again with a brand new envisioning of *AirBuccaneers* on new technology. The concept is still the same, which pits two teams – Vikings or Buccaneers – against each other in airborne battles onboard hot air balloons. It's controlled from first-person as you hop onto one of the many airships situated at your docks, taking command of whichever role best suits you.

There isn't a tutorial of any kind, so paying heed to the tooltips that pop up will be the focus of your first game. While each ship *can* be manned by a single player, they won't last long; you'll need someone to pilot, at least a couple of cannon operators, someone to repair any damage and two or more to make use of blunderbusses to prevent any incoming fire. Though it doesn't look it, it's a fairly complex team game and without everyone playing their part properly there isn't much chance of surviving against an opposing team.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DEATH FROM ABOVE: Though it could be done with a little more style, there's a genuine sense that you're working as part of a crew on board an airship to help overcome your enemies.

Cannons aren't one-shots, however, since you'll need to pre-empt the path of an enemy ship to ensure you hit them, while additional options such as a flamethrower or air mines give you additional ways of overcoming enemy ships. There are 'boosts', too, that provide a tactical advantage both to the pilot and a cannon operator, giving last minute – but limited – manoeuvres in the face of enemy fire or alternative ways of tweaking your own cannons to trick any defence the enemy might be adopting.

Truth be told, however, it's fairly limited in the amount of enjoyment you can get out of it. As fun as the subtle depth to the game is, all modes play out the same as your team advance towards the enemy, a ruckus occurs and someone's ship explodes, repeating until the clock has finished counting down. There is an RPG-esque skill tree to work through, but the rewards take so long to unlock that it's rare you'll want to stick around for this element alone.

Nonetheless, *AirBuccaneers* provides something genuinely original in an increasingly saturated market and at £12 that is something that should be praised. It's early days for the game too, with inevitable tweaks and improvements due at some point down the line. It might not take over your life, but it'll be a nice extra to drop into every so often.



Above: While it is important to know your role on a ship – the RPG skill trees are sort of focused on picking a single role early on – you will need to be able to fill in any position as and when required.



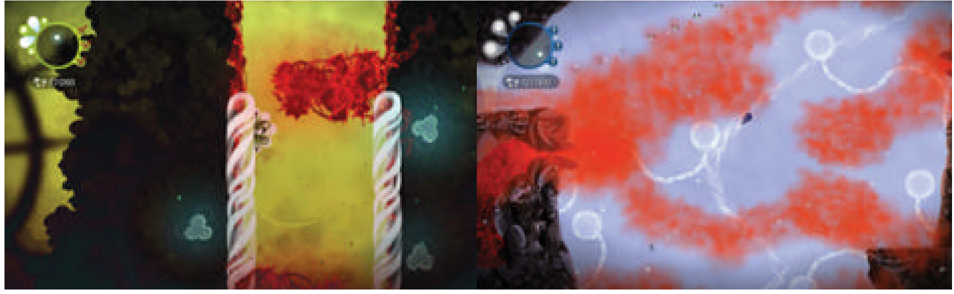
Above: It's pretty exciting to 'ride' into battle alongside your fellow airship captains. There's a very unique genre in here that is beginning to become more and more popular: hopefully *AirBuccaneers* will be enough to coax others into creating their own variations.

VERDICT 7/10

ONE FOR PC GAMERS TO TRY, MAYBE WAIT FOR A STEAM SALE



Inset: With its beautifully surreal and elegant art style *Fly'n* easily gives *Rayman Origins* a run for its money as prettiest platformer on PC, but under that cutesy veneer lies a heart of steel and few recent platform games have been as satisfying to master.



BEAUTIFUL BUT TOUGH AS NAILS

Fly'n

While Steam Greenlight has helped give the PC community a greater voice, for every critical and commercial success like *Gianna Sisters: Twisted Dreams* there's a dud like *Afterfall: InSanity* or an unfortunate like *Forge* which falls through the cracks. But it all feels justified when it delivers a diamond like Ankama Studio's *Fly'n*, which is a simply beautiful, addictive and often plain rock hard gift to platform game fans.

Its premise is as abstract as its gorgeous cartoon art style. It puts you in control of four different Buds, tiny magical creatures that dwell within a surreal World-Tree. The tree is under threat from an evil hair dryer and its Dyer Corporation who are filling it with burning metallic waste, and only by co-operating can the Buds save their home. None of this is ever verbally expressed, mind you, only told through animated scenes, and even gameplay instructions are only charted on in-game blackboards.

But beneath this artsy veneer lies some genuinely innovative and intense platform play. While your four Buds, which are introduced one at a time, share common traits like the ability to double jump, float and phase between two versions of reality to access platforms or remove barriers, their individual powers offer distinct gameplay opportunities when combined. Your blue Bud possesses the ability to sing and unlock parts of levels, the green Bud can climb walls, and the black and yellow Buds possess the power to bounce like a ball and boost around levels like a rocket respectively.

As you progress you're increasingly tasked with expertly using different Buds to solve the well-designed platform puzzles and traverse the hazard-filled levels, which are packed with secrets. The twitch platforming skills of most players will be sorely tested in *Fly'n* which at times almost reaches *Super Meat Boy* levels of hard. It does offer a grudging nod to accessibility with frequent checkpoints and on certain levels offering to halt a burning 'wave of destruction' that chases you, but beyond that, *Fly'n* simply demands mastery of all your skills to progress. That's occasionally frustrating because while it is a platformer that demands so much from the player, *Fly'n* doesn't quite offer a pixel-perfect level of control. Playing with a control pad should be mandatory as well since playing with keyboard and mouse will quickly give even the most nimble player carpal tunnel syndrome.

Despite those little flaws playing *Fly'n* is still a real thrill, especially when you navigate a rock hard platforming section, solve a head-scratching puzzle or defeat one of its huge bizarre bosses. It's a joyful, multi-layered, often innovative and very satisfying game that, because of its difficulty curve, won't be everyone's cup of tea, but will certainly have genre fans happily proving their twitch platforming credentials till the cows come home.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Steam
DEVELOPER: Ankama Studio
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7 32 Bits, Dual Core 2.4 Ghz, 4 GB RAM, Radeon 4850 or Nvidia 9800 GT, Shader Model 3, 512 MB of video memory
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — HELL YEAH!



WORSE THAN — SUPER MEAT BOY

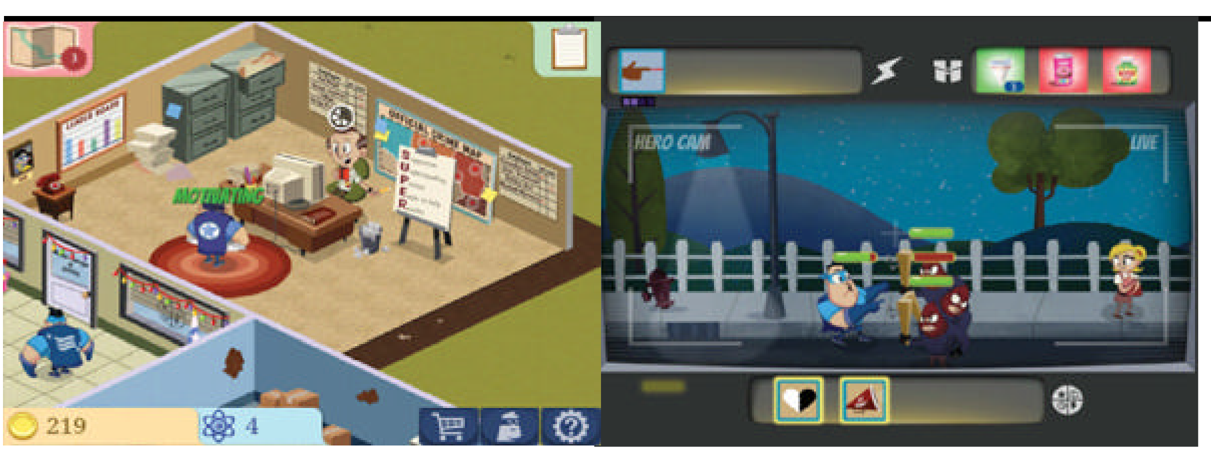
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TALK TO US: The fact that there isn't a single line of spoken or written dialogue in *Fly'n* is part of its charm, but clearer instruction on some mechanics in game would have been welcome.



BEAUTIFUL, QUIRKY TREAT FOR PC PLATFORMING FANS



Left: Battles can be delegated to the heroes involved or watched, the latter allowing you to activate powers and items manually to help snatch victory from the jaws of villainous defeat.

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT YOUR JLA REPORTS...

Middle Manager Of Justice

The App Store is chock-full of freebies. But once you've been stung a couple of times by games that quickly reveal their true colours and are fuelled by regular cash investments, or pay-to-win affairs where victory is sold to the highest bidder, it's easy to get on board with the idea that there really is no such thing as a free meal.

But, to be fair, *Middle Manager Of Justice* is nowhere near as guilty as its peers when it comes to asking for handouts – in fact, it's pretty much entirely monetised by impatience as unfunded progress is both fairly steady and satisfying. The premise is excellent, exploring as it does the pencil-pushing behind-the-scenes rigmarole of running a superhero team, a stark and humdrum contrast to the explosions and excitement we're so used to experiencing. The writing, sadly, is less brilliant. Although dialogue produces the odd giggle, the joke of painting the superhero world in shades of grey is one that can't stand up to this amount of constant retelling.

It's also lacking in the kind of freedom that sets Kairosoft's time sinks apart from the crowd in this increasingly congested genre. Some of the intentionally generic and stereotypical heroes are amusing, but they'd have the potential to be far more so if you could just create and name them for yourself, or even just create smaller stables of heroes from your overall roster. As a result, evolving and improving your heroes is less fulfilling than it could be, more a means to an end than a genuine sense of characters you care about growing stronger. Although given the nature of the game's theme, maybe that could be considered the point.

Superium (the game's premium currency) might be in short supply, but beyond using it to hire heroes, it's purely used to speed things along. Even the recruitment process isn't costly if you've the patience to raise basic crime-fighters from scratch rather than splashing out on pre-levelled supers. Juggling the various crimes that gradually wear down each district (in turn leading to reduced income) with research and growth can be tricky, though it's not hard to claw an area back into favour with a focused crime-stomping. And fortunately, things don't continue to sour while you're away from the game.

Middle Manager Of Justice sits rather uncomfortably between the horribly addictive Kairosoft titles and long-term time management distractions where cash is king. It's an entertaining offering in its own right, if not one likely to hold attention like something like *Game Dev Story*, nor pull in the pennies like games where most tasks are measured in days rather than minutes and impulse impatient purchases win out. Not the game the genre deserves, then, nor the one it needs, but an amusing and characterful distraction all the same that most will be able to enjoy purely on Double Fine's dollar.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iPad
OTHER FORMATS: iPhone
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Double Fine
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MIDDLE MAN: *MMOJ* falls somewhere between extended time management games like *Zombie Cafe* and more hands-on variants like *Tiny Tower*, though it's not an entirely happy medium.

VERDICT 7/10

FALLS JUST SHORT OF SUPER



Left: As well as managing your heroes' time, you need to stay on top of what your middle manager himself is up to – his abilities can turn the tide of a tough battle, especially when upgraded.

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

Black Knight Sword

Player feedback means a lot of different things to a lot of different developers. To BioWare, a vocal minority calling bullshit on an (admittedly weak) ending was enough to call all hands back to the deck as the unfavourable finale was retroactively patched. Unfavourably. To FPS developers, a single forum post about X gun being overpowered can be enough to see it crippled by a knee-jerk nerf, only to have its former glory restored when the dust settles. But at Grasshopper, things apparently work a little differently. "Dear Grasshopper," reads the letter we wrote to the studio, only we didn't actually because y'know, writing is hard. "*Shadows Of The Damned* was amazing, but you were taking the piss with that drawn-out side-scrolling nonsense, right? Have a word, yeah?"

"Not at all," comes the reply (or at least it would, if either letter or response could sit comfortably in the non-fiction aisle). "We liked it. We found it pretty funny. But you know what would be even funnier? IF WE MADE A WHOLE GAME LIKE THAT."

But sadly, it's not a punchline that ever fully delivers on the promise of the joke. We 'enjoyed' those parts of *Shadows* in context, mostly given that the game is set in Hell – why *wouldn't* that backdrop allow devs to torment players with sections that outstay their welcome in a situational capacity? But *Black Knight Sword* doesn't offer that context – in fact, it offers none. You awake, miraculously free of a noose, only to become the titular warrior seconds later and from that point on, nothing that happens makes any more sense. One level sees you riding a giant chicken as the game becomes a bullet hell shooter on a whim. Thematically, the only explanation we could formulate was that all the chicken jokes from every *Fable* game had suddenly become sentient and unionised, only to discover that they still weren't funny. And that's pretty much the level.

Mechanically, Grasshopper's latest fancies itself as a tidy old-school *Castlevania* cosplayer – a hardcore platformer that eschews fair play in favour of brutal difficulty. And in terms of challenge, it's got the costume *down*. But it seldom feels fair, nor does dying over and over reward or lead to better play – this is just an unfair world in which unfair things happen. Unfair things dressed up in Terry Gilliam silliness, sure, but unfair things all the same.

And as entertaining as *Black Knight Sword*'s unique style may make it, it struggles to escape the 'art for art's sake' rod it creates for its own back, and never excuses itself properly. Aesthetics can only carry it so far – it's a decent little game but one almost entirely devoid of the context or meaning that would elevate it to anything higher.

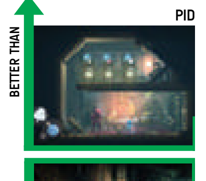
"Dear Grasshopper," our new letter reads. "You were wrong. This joke was never that funny in the first place."

DETAILS

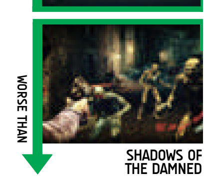
FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Grasshopper Manufacture
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: 800 Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

PID

BETTER THAN



WORSE THAN



SHADOWS OF THE DAMNED

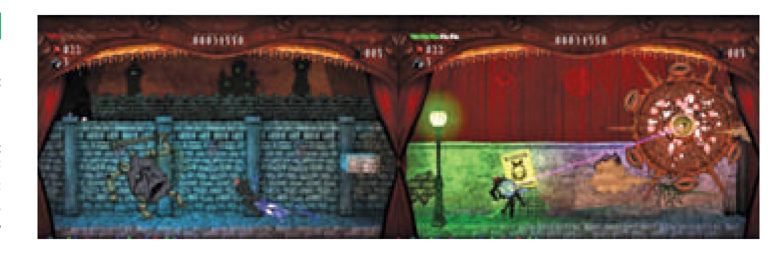
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CONTEXT CONTEST: *Black Knight Sword*'s stylised approach is awesome, but with little narrative to frame matters it can feel a little like quirkiness for quirkiness' sake.

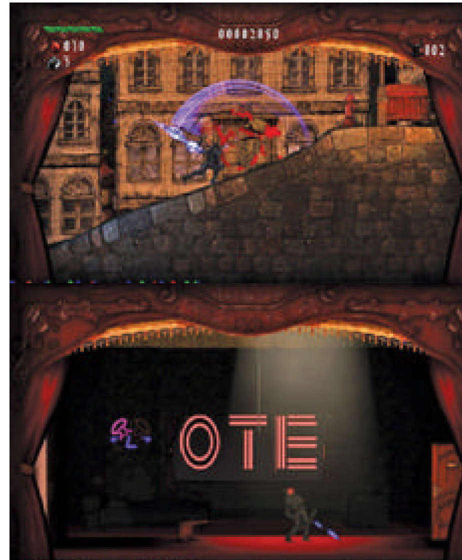



VERDICT 6/10
STOP THAT - IT'S SILLY



Below: You might want to consider turning the sound down before playing; intentionally or otherwise, it creates quite the cacophony.





Above: Stylistically, *Black Knight Sword* is outstanding. It's just a shame the mechanics don't really back up the wonderful visuals.

YOOT SAITO'S NEW PUZZLER IS SO MUCH MORE THAN JUST EXCESS BAGGAGE

Aero Porter

Maverick Japanese developer Yoot Saito may be famous for creating the uniquely disconcerting *Seaman* for the Sega Dreamcast, but the premise of his latest venture is a little more mundane – it places you in charge of sorting baggage at a busy airport. A series of carousel conveyor belts transport the luggage around, and using the L and R shoulder triggers you can move the colour-coded bags up and down the levels. Once you've loaded the correct colour onto the correct plane, it departs from the terminal and earns you a cash bonus. Fail to get all the bags on-board before the allotted departure time – or load the wrong colour by accident – and you'll be hit with a penalty.

You start off with just three carousels to worry about, but as your airport grows, so too do the demands placed on your operation. More carousels are added, increasing the complexity and ramping up the difficulty. To make things even more tense, additional elements are thrown into the mix, such as a lighting system which can be used to conserve your valuable fuel (these things don't run on thin air, after all) and a speed regulator which allows you to lower or boost the pace at which the belts move. These can be a help, but can also prove a hindrance; for example, switching the lights off to save fuel means it's harder to ascertain the colour of the baggage.

Before long *Aero Porter* becomes the most demanding juggling act you could possibly imagine, especially when you have multiple carousels operating in tandem and several flights waiting, all with different departure times which must be observed closely. Just when you think you've got the hang of things, *Aero Porter* hurls a massive spanner in the works with special assignments, such as VIP demands which usually involve getting an item of luggage to the correct plane immediately. Succeed in these tasks and you'll gain a massive cash boost, but fail and the ramifications can be crippling.

While *Aero Porter* initially seems intimidating, prolonged play allows you to get your head around the mechanics of the game. Once you begin to master the knack of dropping the belts at the right time and managing large volumes of luggage, things really begin to open up. Although there's a sense of progression in place, this is essentially a score-attack game where the ultimate aim is to go beyond your own personal best.

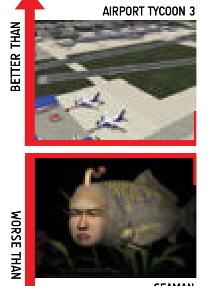
As such, *Aero Porter* isn't going to be to everyone's tastes – the sparse presentation is also going to be a barrier to entry for many potential players. However, like all of Saito's output, it's still well worth experiencing first-hand; there's a beauty in the way in which the game is put together, even if it sometimes threatens to flummox the player with its extreme difficulty and exhausting demands.



VERDICT 7/10
A UNIQUE BUT INCREDIBLY CHALLENGING PUZZLER

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS (eShop)
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Level-5
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £4.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



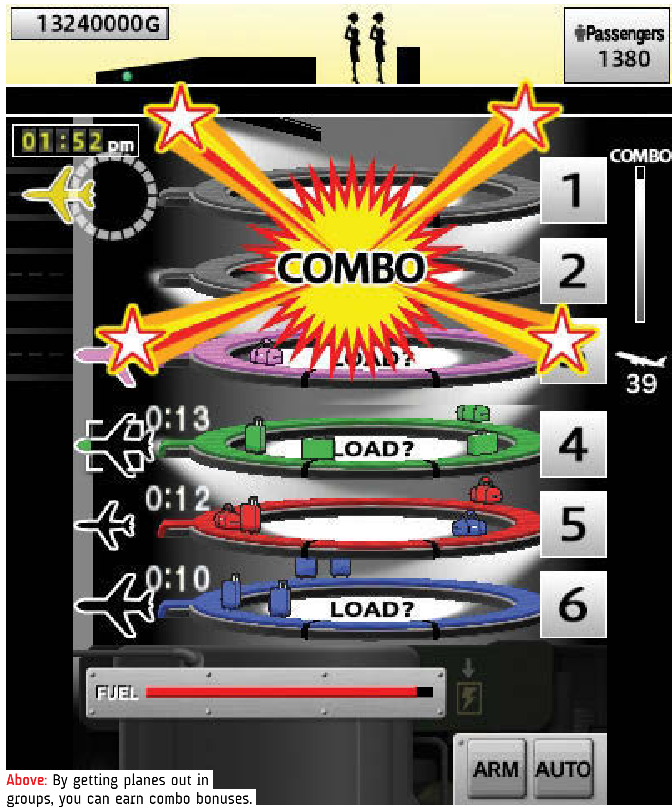
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

OPTIONS: Few games would attempt to replicate the process of baggage handling at an airport, but *Aero Porter*'s approach is more akin to a mind-bending puzzle game than an accurate simulation.



Below: You'll have to deal with suspect packages and VIP demands as well as regular luggage.



Above: By getting planes out in groups, you can earn combo bonuses.

DEFINITELY WORTH ALL THE FUS RO DAH

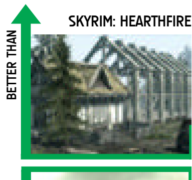
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Dragonborn

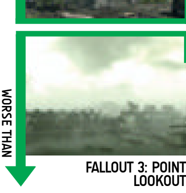
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3 and PC in 2013
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks
DEVELOPER: Bethesda Game Studios
PRICE: 1,600 Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

SKYRIM: HEARTHFIRE





WORSE THAN

FALLOUT 3: POINT LOOKOUT

In the world of Skyrim, knowledge carries with it a heavy burden. The more you explore the land, the more you will uncover and learn. But with completion comes the comprehension that all good things must come to an end, and even the fantasy realm of Tamriel is finite. It's fitting then that *Skyrim*'s third DLC to date focuses on the theme of forbidden knowledge, and its tempting new map is to be savoured slowly rather than voraciously consumed.

Unlike DLC packs *Dawnguard* and *Hearthfire* before it, *Dragonborn* offers players unknown ground instead of forcing them to retread already familiar haunts. You'll set sail for the isle of Solstheim on the trail of the mysterious Miraak, the first Dragonborn, currently trapped in Oblivion but plotting a violent return to the physical realm. To do so, he's somehow enslaving the minds of mortal and dragon alike. The main questline to halt Miraak's machinations is narratively ham-fisted but brings with it that blessed excuse for pastures new. Solstheim is a dense land of variety and opportunity, but its mushroom towers and Dwemer ruins are upstaged by trips to the Oblivion plane of Apocrypha. This twisted Lovecraftian nether realm of soiled books, slithering tentacles and stretching corridors is enough to drive a mind to pleasurable madness, and it's worlds away from the misty mountains and musty halls of Skyrim. For that, it is most welcome.

Below: The most useful new shout in *Dragonborn* is Dragon Aspect, which enhances your combat prowess.



Dragonborn's most enticing feature upon announcement unfortunately turns out to be its most disappointing upon release. With frequent glitching, poor camera tracking and unresponsive controls, the ability to tame and ride dragons is anti-climactic and awkward at best. Fortunately though, there are plenty of other pursuits to keep you occupied even after the main quest's somewhat stilted ending, including new shouts to learn, numerous side-quests to discover and new armour sets and weapons to craft or loot from foes.

Though it is never truly innovative, *Dragonborn* weaves well into the wider lore of *Skyrim*, and offers fresh experiences to even the most seasoned of Tamriel's travellers. Powerful knowledge indeed.

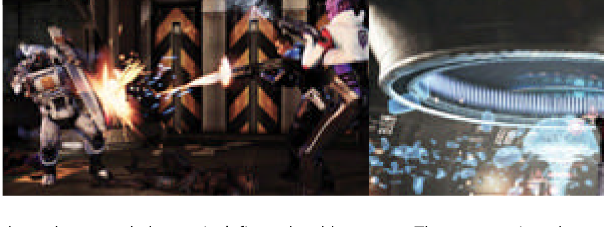


VERDICT 8/10
AN EPIC UNDERTAKING IN BOTH SIZE AND SCALES

THE ALPHA ON OMEGA GETS HER CHANCE TO SHINE

Mass Effect 3: Omega

Below: Glitching is a prominent problem in *Mass Effect: Omega*, all but spoiling the central rousing speech between T'Loak and her loyal army as she disappears from frame or faces the wrong way. Frequent audio drops also disappoint.



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: Playstation 3, PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: Bioware Montreal
PRICE: £11.99, 1,200 Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

ARRIVAL



WORSE THAN

MASS EFFECT 3: LEVIATHAN

In the brief but memorable moments spent with her during the events of *Mass Effect 2* and *3*, Aria T'Loak was an intoxicating and intriguing presence. Get to know her better though, and infatuation quickly fades away as she is exposed as being disappointingly one-dimensional. *Omega*, *Mass Effect 3*'s latest and long-anticipated DLC, focuses on the Asari crime boss as she attempts to oust Cerberus from her throne on Omega and bring the shady space station back under her absolute control. To assure success Shepard is recruited with Aria in a rare moment of begrudging acknowledgment and acceptance of Shepard's superiority in combat.

And combat is something that *Omega* has in plentiful supply, with lengthy shoot-outs offering new companions, new weapons and new enemies, but lacking much innovation or the necessity for new tactics. That said, it's still solid action, even though you're denied having your usual squad at your back. Instead, Aria accompanies you throughout, and the series' first playable female Turian, Nyreen, pops in and out periodically to offer her assistance. Nyreen and her unwavering moral code provide a fascinating counterbalance to Aria's relentless ruthlessness, so it's a shame she's squandered, as your time with her is so short.

Omega is now a war zone, and as such, the neon strips and seedy alleys are deserted, destroyed, or even dingier than before. Some of its better known locations are saved for the final act, but the journey there offers some interesting glimpses of the war being waged against Cerberus troops elsewhere.

The story is almost entirely self-contained; there are no revelations or repercussions, and it doesn't flow back into the overall narrative of the main game. While combat is enjoyable, one of *Mass Effect*'s defining features has always been in giving you purpose to pull the trigger, and with few moral decisions or meaningful character interactions, Shepard feels largely detached from this expedition. This is Aria's moment in the sun, but this doesn't do the proud pirate queen any justice, and ends up showing her in the harshest light.



VERDICT 5/10
LIKE ARIA, OMEGA IS ALL BUSINESS, NO HEART

THERE'S FIRE IN THE HOLE, BUT NOTHING LEFT TO BURN

Little Inferno

They say the flame that burns twice as bright burns half as long, and that describes both the premise and the problems of quirky fire based puzzle game Little Inferno. Created by a three-man team previously responsible for puzzle hits like *Henry Hatsworth In The Puzzling Adventure* and *World Of Goo* it sports clever physics-driven gameplay and a darkly cute aesthetic that *WOG* fans will find familiar but its premise, which casts you in the role of the brand new owner of a Little Inferno Entertainment Fireplace, is all about wanton destruction with fire.

In an attempt to stay warm, entertained and monied in the surreal world of constant winter, you'll purchase all manner of zany items from a series of catalogues and cast them into your hungry fireplace. *Little Inferno* is a clever satire on mindless consumerism as the various crazy things need to be burned in combos that grant you money to buy more things to burn, and postage stamps that shorten their delivery time. Many of its combos are cultural references or gaming in-jokes like Movie Night, which has you burn a TV and some popcorn, Zombie Garden, which has you burn a cute toy zombie with an Instant Seed Packet or Spam Cloud which has you burn email and the Internet Cloud for example.

It's an endless loop of buying, burning and combo discovery with no additional rules, points or penalties, leaving you free to explore its combo system which, initially at least, is fairly addictive. The satisfaction of working out combos and the way the fire roars to life and consumes your unfortunate animated items, which often burn, scream and react in comic but disturbing ways, are exactly the kinds of addictive hooks that will speak to many gamers.

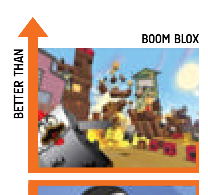
As you progress, new catalogues open up, granting more items with which to create ever more obscure combos, driving the game forward. Even better, *Little Inferno* is also telling a disturbing little animated story in this bleak world, primarily told through letters from your increasingly fire obsessed neighbour Sugar Plumps. It's here that *Little Inferno*'s themes of the evils of mindless consumerism and social isolation are implicitly expressed in a compelling way through its cutesy but grotesque art style.

It's all very engrossing for a while but the problem is that *Little Inferno*'s addictive gameplay loop eventually suffers from diminishing returns. Once the initial fascination with how its fire and physics systems bring your blazing offerings to life and making combos starts to wear thin, there simply isn't enough gameplay here to carry everyone to a very surreal but enjoyable conclusion, which is a shame. *Little Inferno*, as heart warming as it is as an idea, simply doesn't have quite enough fuel to equally warm both its gameplay and narrative halves in equal measure, leaving it an enjoyable but potentially unfulfilling experience.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Wii U
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Tomorrow Corporation
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP 32-bit, Intel E1200 dual core / AMD Athlon 64 X2 4000+, Socket AM2 or better, 2 GB memory
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN



BOOM BLOX

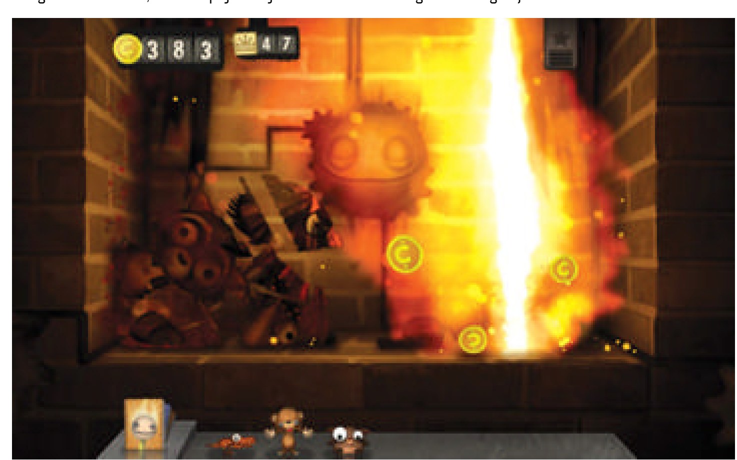
WORSE THAN



WORLD OF GOO



Above: You use the cursor to move objects around and set them ablaze; it can be mesmerising thanks to the way the game's animation, fire and physics systems all work to bring its burning objects to life.



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DEPTH: While the key reason to play *Little Inferno* is to experience its story, its gameplay is ultimately too shallow. A more structured gameplay challenge would have at least allowed replayability.

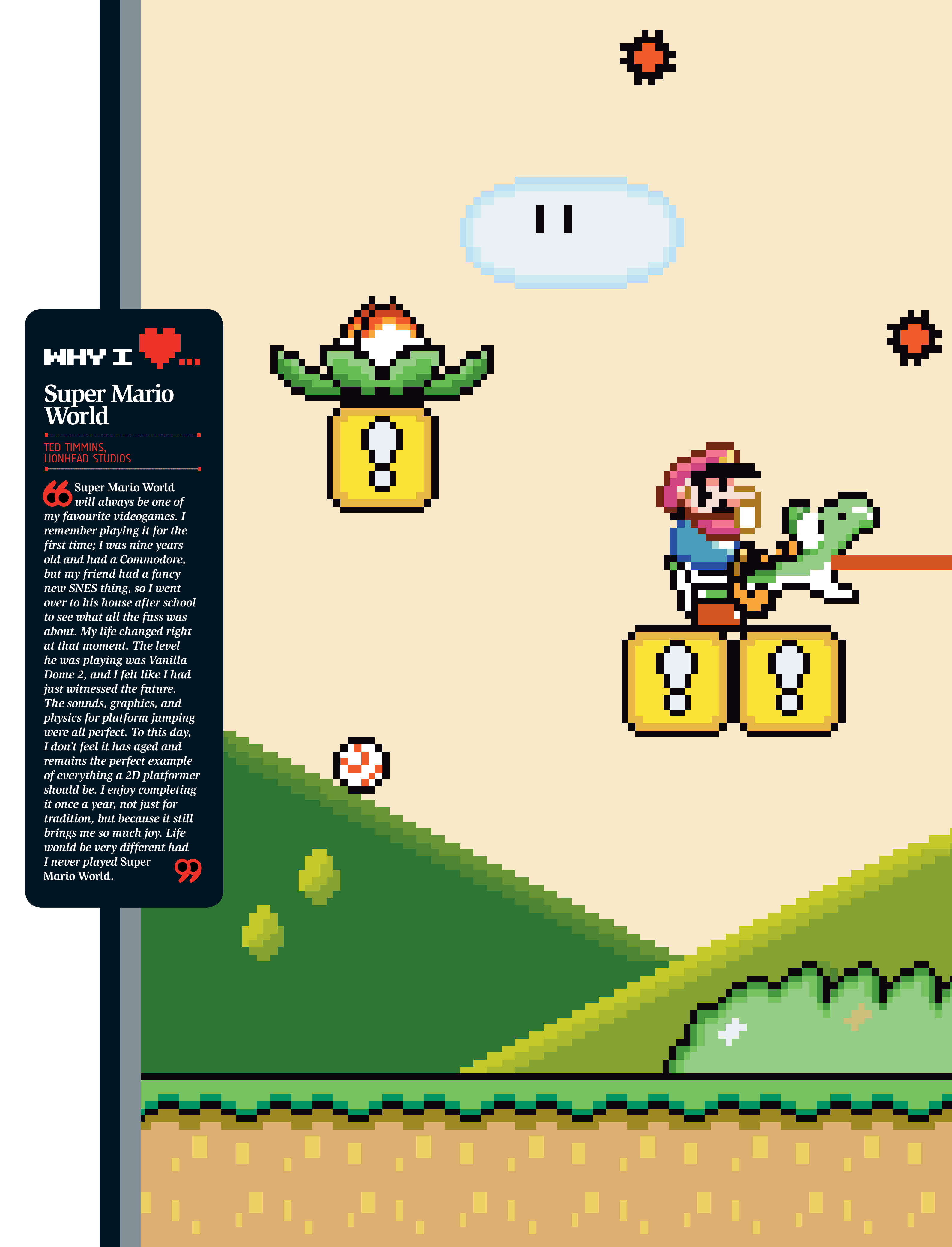


Above: Designer Kyle Gabler's twisted art style is excellent, but the slow way this mysterious world is revealed through various characters letters is what most effectively draws you in.



VERDICT 7/10

BURNS BRIGHTLY AT FIRST ONLY TO QUICKLY FADE AWAY

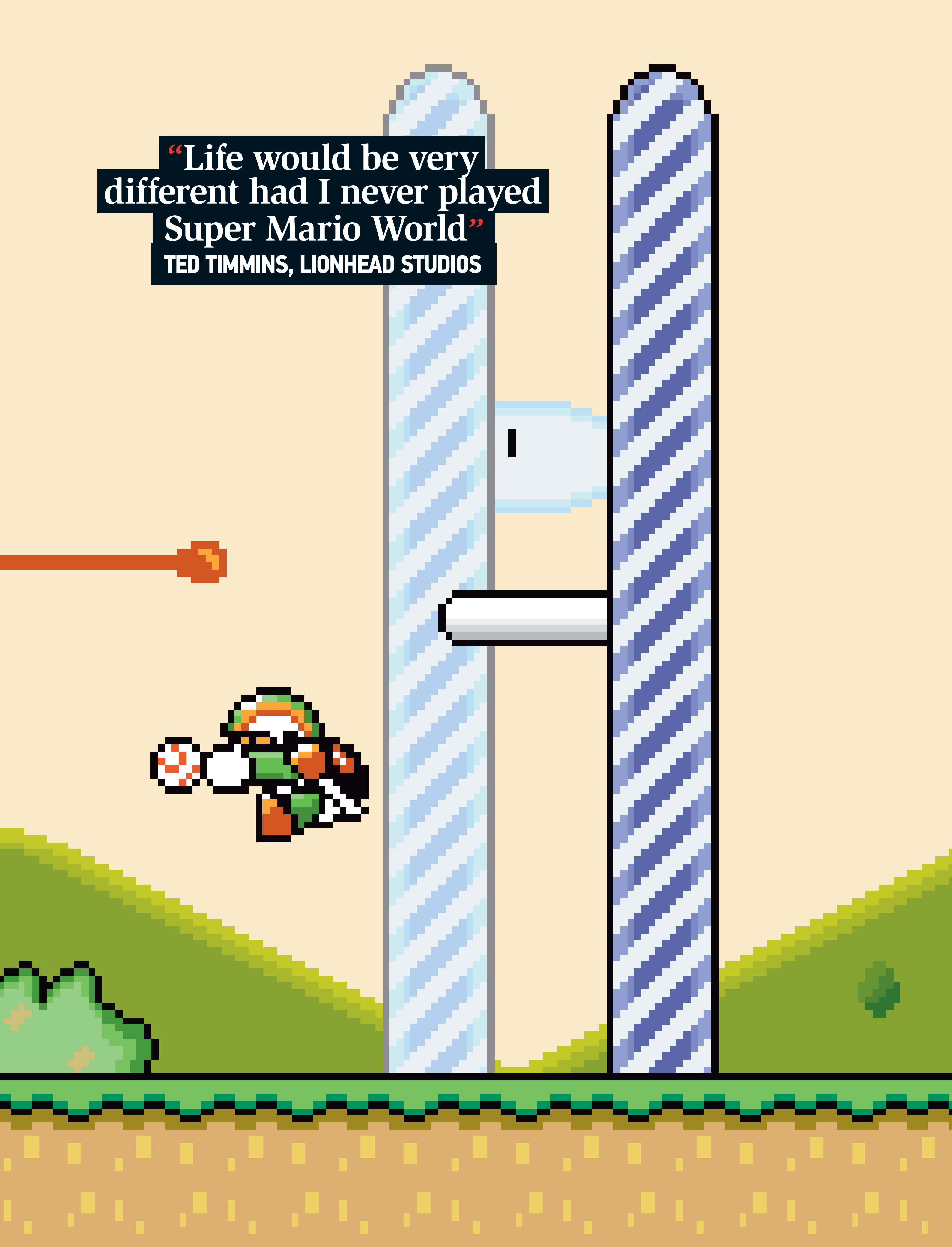


WHY I ♥...

Super Mario World

TED TIMMINS,
LIONHEAD STUDIOS

Super Mario World will always be one of my favourite videogames. I remember playing it for the first time; I was nine years old and had a Commodore, but my friend had a fancy new SNES thing, so I went over to his house after school to see what all the fuss was about. My life changed right at that moment. The level he was playing was Vanilla Dome 2, and I felt like I had just witnessed the future. The sounds, graphics, and physics for platform jumping were all perfect. To this day, I don't feel it has aged and remains the perfect example of everything a 2D platformer should be. I enjoy completing it once a year, not just for tradition, but because it still brings me so much joy. Life would be very different had I never played Super Mario World.



"Life would be very different had I never played Super Mario World"

TED TIMMINS, LIONHEAD STUDIOS

RETRO

>"WHAT A FOOLISH THING TO LEAVE LYING AROUND"

NO.131 JANUARY 2013



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BEHIND THE SCENES

SCORCHED TANKS

Scorched Tanks burst onto the public domain scene in 1994 and proved that anything the PC could do, the Amiga could do better. Creator[redacted]el P Welch remem[redacted] how it all started

IF YOU WERE an Amiga owner in the early Nineties, you may well have dabbled in the computer's popular public domain scene. If you did so, it was equally likely that you were fully aware of Michael P Welch's excellent artillery game *Scorched Tanks*. If you didn't, then you missed out on one of the system's popular games.

At its core there was nothing original about *Scorched Tanks*, but if gaming has taught us one thing, it's not always about what comes first, it's all about leaving your mark. And Welch certainly left his mark when he unleashed *Scorched Tanks* on the Amiga's hungry homebrew scene.

"I grew up an Amiga fan," begins Welch when we ask him about *Scorched Tanks*' origins. "One day, a friend of mine dared to invite me over to show me his PC. He said, 'I have one game that you need to see for yourself. It's important that you, as an Amiga zealot, see this PC game and acknowledge it as pretty cool.' "

That game turned out to be *Scorched Earth*, a turn-based artillery game by Wendell Hicken. *Scorched Earth* pitted two players against each other and the idea was to adjust the trajectory of your tank's turret in order to hit your opponent. It looked simple, but it proved to be an amazingly addictive game, and it certainly left an impact on Welch.

"I went 'Holy smokes, this is actually pretty awesome for a PC game'," he recalls about the pivotal moment. "I thought back to all the stuff that had been made for the Amiga… I had never seen anything like this before on my favourite computer. And from that day forward, I took it upon myself to make a game this great for the Amiga. It was such a popular idea… it was the right idea at the right time."

WITH AN IDEA firmly in his head, Welch went to work and started on his love letter to Hicken's addictive shareware game. We're well aware of the huge bedroom coding scene that was rampant in the UK during the early and mid Eighties, but the same thing was happening over in the US as well – we're just rarely told about it.

"How many people?" Welch begins when we ask if he had any help with *Scorched Tanks*' design. "It was just me. I was the only person working on it, in my back bedroom. Yes, we have those in the United States. The original *Scorched Tanks* took me three months to create. I was in college and I had three months to spare over break. I decided to take my summer vacation and turn it into a new game. In truth, the demo had started earlier on, it's just that I finally showed a fellow Amiga user and he said, 'This is totally awesome, you need to finish it!' So I took what was essentially a tech demo and, in three months, I polished it up and released it to GENIE [General Electric Network for Information Exchange] which is where we released things on the Amiga back then, to the internet."

Welch makes the project sound relatively straightforward, but while the development time was fairly quick, it wasn't without its issues. *Scorched Tanks* was created using AMOS, a dialect of BASIC programming language for the Amiga. Despite being rather slow, it's a comprehensive programming tool that allowed Welch to make good progress. "AMOS



Released: 1994
Format: Amiga
Publisher: Self-published, later in association with Dark Unicorn Productions
Developer: In-house

KEY STAFF:
Michael P Welch
Programmer & Designer
Shane Monroe
PR & Producer
Eric Gieseke
Composer



Scorched Tanks caters for up to four players, with three being computer-controlled if you don't have friends.



Mike estimates he's spent four man-years of his life poring over every small detail when designing fanciful new weapons.



TO PUBLISH OR NOT TO PUBLISH

ONE OF the things that's interesting about *Worms* and *Scorched Tanks* is that they were both small projects created by one person. One game became a prominent enduring franchise, while the other faded into the background, kept alive by an extremely loyal fan base. We wondered what would have happened if *Scorched Tanks* had received a publisher upon its release and asked Welch why he instead chose to release it as a shareware game.

"I decided to release *Scorched Tanks* as shareware because I had no connections to the game industry," is the simple reply. "I'm from a section of the country where there's no game development at all, so it was always very grass-roots. The shareware concept was the grass-roots way. I didn't have any money, I didn't have any influence, I didn't have any resources, I didn't have any contacts. I just knew that shareware was the way you could take something cool that you made and release it.

"I never talked to a publisher, and a publisher never contacted me. In fact, for all these years, I don't think I've ever been contacted by a publisher. I think publishers are the sort of thing you go out looking for. Now that I've been in business for a while, I'm realising that it's who you know and not necessarily what you know that helps your business grow. I think games like *Scorched Tanks* don't necessarily get published, because [their creators] just didn't know who to talk to. I think if you have the right idea and know who to talk to, that's when the magic happens…"

allowed you to make really great programs, but it was a little slow," Welch confirms. "The Amiga could very easily have scrolling screens, and it could have lots of animations and colourful graphics, but some of the per-pixel stuff was really slow, so I had to find libraries that used assembly language to ramp up the speed to acceptable levels. The Amiga hardware lent itself well to the creation of *Scorched Tanks*. But in all honesty, making the dirt fall quickly was extremely difficult on the Amiga due to its planar video graphics system, when chunky pixel memory like a PC would have been faster. Making pixel dirt fall on the Amiga was a fun and worthy challenge."

Ultimately *Scorched Tanks*' development was relatively straightforward, although Welch does recall that he had more problems when it came to the overall aesthetic style of the game: "The artistic and design bits were the hard part."

When it arrived on the Amiga, Welch's game proved extremely popular, mainly because he'd crammed so much into it. *Scorched Tanks* may have had similar gameplay to *Scorched Earth*, but the sheer amount of variety in its weapons was truly mind-boggling. Players start off with a set amount of cash and can buy all sorts of different weapons. Single shots, Superskippers, Dirtballs, Zappers and Mountain Movers are just a few of the weapons on offer, while the destructible terrain greatly adds to the addictive gameplay. Welch – only played *Scorched Earth* that one time he was around his friend's house – recall creation of *Scorched Tanks*' numerous and often over-the-top weapons was a fairly organic process.

I DECIDED TO TAKE MY SUMMER VACATION AND TURN IT INTO A NEW GAM



"IN TRUTH, I started with basic concepts like: flying bullets, circular explosions, and various homing and proximity effects for variety. I've been improvising new weapons from those core concepts ever since, just following my muse wherever it leads me. Plus I've received thousands of handwritten letters and emails since 1993 with weapon suggestions from fans. It seems that dreaming up cool weapon designs is something that my artillery games inspire in people. I think that playing *Scorched Tanks* is like watching Looney Tunes [cartoons] and trying to imagine what





This skipper is an ace weapon, carrying on for several bounces, hitting anything in its path.


Tanks will often spawn near each other, so you'll need to keep this in mind when planning attacks.



INCOMING!

DESPITE THE fact that the original *Scorched Tanks* is now over 20 years old, Welch continues to return to it on newer systems when the chance arises.

He's currently hard at work on a remake, but this time he's got help: "I'm actually working with a team of artists, producers, designers and programmers. This is our opportunity to develop something of the calibre of *Worms*. Up to this point, our games have been a humble one- to two-person effort over the course of many years. *Scorched Tanks* is our attempt, using all that I've learned over the past 20 years, to do what Team 17 did back in 1995."

It's a bold claim, but we'd expect nothing less from the passionate Welch, and the ideas his team are planning certainly sound exciting. "We're going to be exploring different terrain types, like metal, lava, glass, radioactive and more… all with different gameplay elements and effects on each other," says Welch. "And I've always dreamed of adding sand or water to my games. We really want the new terrain types to offer brand new strategies and tactics that have never been seen before in an artillery game. Weapons might even release new types of terrains, and cause things to interact. It's going to be very emergent. In many ways the game is going to make itself, it's going to be sandbox style game, and it's exciting to watch it unfold."



the next crazy ACME weapon will be that the coyote pulls out of the crate to use on the road runner. These days I still enjoy designing weapons on my own, but with [the] team here at BlitWise and the mountains of suggestions from fans, our newest weapons are better than ever."

If *Scorched Tanks*' weapons were straightforward, the balancing of them was also a breeze. Admittedly with hundreds of weapons available, there are always going to be a few issues, but they rarely appear when you're actually playing. We were expecting to hear that Welch spent hours tirelessly creating the subtle balance between the huge arsenal that was available to the player, but the answer surprised us, with Welch claiming, "I'll be honest with you: I just winged it. You want to have weapons that give the right feeling of power, and damage, and payoff. You don't want to saturate it where everyone has a Nuke or a Mega Nuke or a Super Epic Mega Nuke. I haven't done a whole lot of testing with people, though I have heard if someone thinks I made a bad weapon. It's generally pretty heuristic in terms of balancing weapons, but there is a lot of work that goes into it, both in *Scorched Tanks* and today, because I am still making weapons for artillery games."



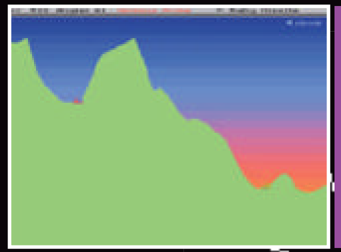
WORMS COMES OUT [AND] I FELT, 'WOW… I GUESS I SHOULD HAVE FOUND A PUBLISHER!'

SCORCHED TANKS MAY have been a big deal on the Amiga's public domain scene, but it was quickly overshadowed by another artillery game; one that remains massively popular to this day. The game is of course *Worms* and Welch can still clearly remember the first time he heard about it. "I remember in that issue of *Amiga Power* where they said: 'Team 17 is working on a new game, it's an artillery game, and it seems to be inspired by *Scorched Tanks*.' I thought to myself, 'Wow, I got another mention in the magazine! I wonder what this game is?' A few months later *Worms* comes out, and it's been all *Worms* ever since. I felt, 'Wow… I guess I should have found a publisher!'.

Despite the enduring appeal of *Worms*, Welch doesn't feel cheated that it's gone on to occupy the limelight, reminding us that "*Scorched Tanks* did come out before *Worms*, but let's be honest, *Scorched Earth* came out before both, and lots of artillery games predate 'The Mother of all Games' *Scorched Earth*. I don't necessarily feel like I have the corner on the market for artillery games on the Amiga, or artillery games in general. I'm not annoyed, because it's an Amiga game, it's a British game, and it's born of all the things that I care about when it comes

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

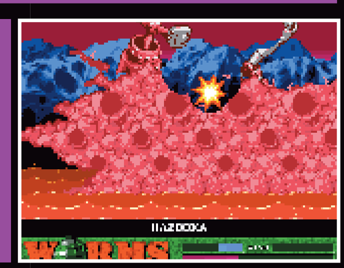
Scorched Earth > Scorched Tanks > Worms



Scorched Earth certainly wasn't the first artillery game to ever appear, but it is the one that ignited a creative spark within Michael P Welch.



Scorched Tanks added bells and whistles – amazingly, on a less powerful machine. A huge homebrew hit, it eventually led to this...



to videogames. Keeping my artillery games indie for all these years has given me the flexibility to make the game I want to make, and amazingly still pay the bills. *Worms* started out with good funding, and a really cool development community over in Europe. They got the limelight, and that's good because they had to put a lot of money into marketing the game and selling it in stores. But *Scorched Tanks* is an indie game, and indie developers have the underdog thing going for them. So if anything, *Worms* coming out with great fanfare just kind of fed my indie, grass-roots, underdog attitude."

SCORCHED TANKS MAY not have enjoyed the success of Team 17's popular series, but Welch remains dedicated to his first game and has continued to update it and evolve it over the years. First with *Pocket Tanks*, and now with a new reboot of *Scorched Tanks* which should be appearing on various platforms later on in the year. This commitment to is commendable and began when it was still shareware. Even though Welch knew he had a good game on his hands, generous donations via shareware pushed him ever onwards to improve his base game.

"When you create a commercial game, the motivation is: fund the game, make the game, market the game, put the game in a box, ship it to sto
ask him about *Scorched Tanks*' numerous updates. "When you create a shareware game, and it's just one person working on it, generally speaking, the enthusiasm of the people buying the game drives the developer to work harder. When you have a boxed commercial game, you just want to tell customers, 'This CD is all you ever need to play the game, and if you like it then we are working on the sequel for next year.' But when making shareware, or downloadable games, you feel as though the more you improve the game, the more people will show interest. So there's always that intense drive to make the game the best it can be. In the case of *Scorched Tanks*, I received hundreds of shareware registration letters in the mail. Obviously, when people send you cash, you naturally feel like working harder. With a successful shareware title, you're just constantly motivated to continue working on it because people are appreciating your work in a very tangible way. You can't help but continue to work on it."

And Welch continues to work on his labour of love, giving it a level of polish that has now been applied through various updates for nearly 20 years. If that level of commitment doesn' make you want to visit this superb strategy game, nothing will.

Special thanks to Michael and the rest of his team at BlitWise for their help with this article.





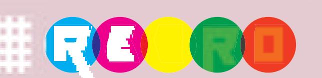
"The game itself is still pretty decent, but what's the point in another version which adds so little to the genre?"

Amiga Power, issue 41, Sep 1994



Getting hit by multiple lasers is a sure way of losing your precious shields.

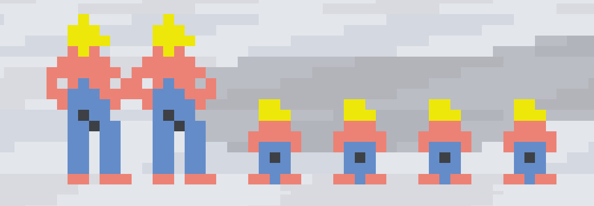




BEST BOSS

SPACE HARRIER ARCADE [Sega] 1985

■ WITH ITS chequerboard backdrops and eye-popping speed and colour, *Space Harrier* made a great first impression on anyone that played it. Beyond its impossibly pretty visuals, you'd discover a game that was just as fun as it was stunning, offering addictive gameplay that saw your titular Space Harrier firing hot plasma death into anything that was stupid enough to stray into its gunsights. The most impressive of these enemies were the massive, often screen-filling bosses that awaited you at the end of each stage. As tough to take down as they were exotic to look at, many of them looked distinctly odd and ranged from skeletal dragons to fire-spewing rock heads. By far the most memorable however was the beautiful beastie you battled on *Space Harrier*'s third stage. Going by the name of Godarni, it's a huge two-headed Chinese dragon that vomits out deadly fireballs from both heads. Moving majestically through the air, it's tough to take down due to the accuracy of its projectiles.

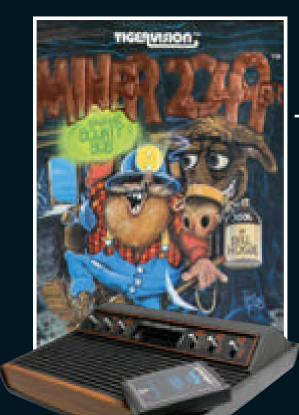



STAGE 3



CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports, under the spotlight



SYSTEM FAILURE

Format: Atari 2600
Year: 1983
Publisher: Tigervision
Developer: In-house

MINER 2049ER

ORIGINAL RELEASE **Board:** Apple II **Year:** 1982 **Publisher:** Big Five Software **Developer:** Bill Hogue

RELEASED IN 1982, *Miner 2049er* was a seminal and popular platformer owing to its simple and addictive gameplay and large number of varied levels. Whereas gamers were lucky if they got more than three distinct stages in a videogame back in 1982 (gamers were pretty amazed when *Donkey Kong* burst on the scene with four stages a year earlier), *Miner 2049er* had a staggering ten, and, like *Donkey Kong*, each was individually themed.

The gameplay of *Miner 2049er* is really simple. You play the role of Bounty Bob, a member of the Canadian Mounted Police on a mission to search a series of radioactive mines for the despicable Yukon Yohan. Each mine takes the form of a single screen stage that comprises platforms, enemies and bonus objects to collect, and Bob has to reclaim them by colouring in every inch of their footpaths with his feet.

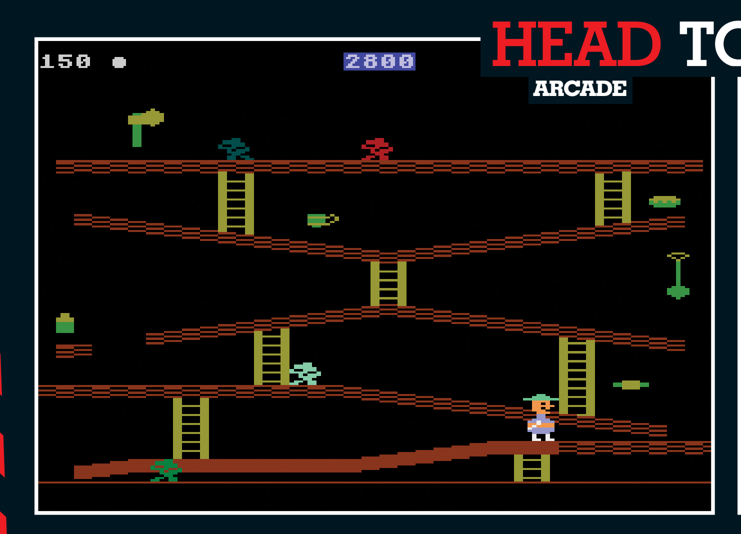
Making this mission more perilous is a stringent time limit and deadly radioactive creatures that patrol the mines. Bob can either jump over enemies, or, by collecting special items dotted around the levels, make them momentarily vulnerable – they basically work like *Pac-Man* power pellets.

Miner 2049er was really very popular in its day, and so there wasn't much it didn't appear on. The worst conversion is an easy pick, though: the slow, frustrating and pretty much broken port that appeared on the Atari 2600.

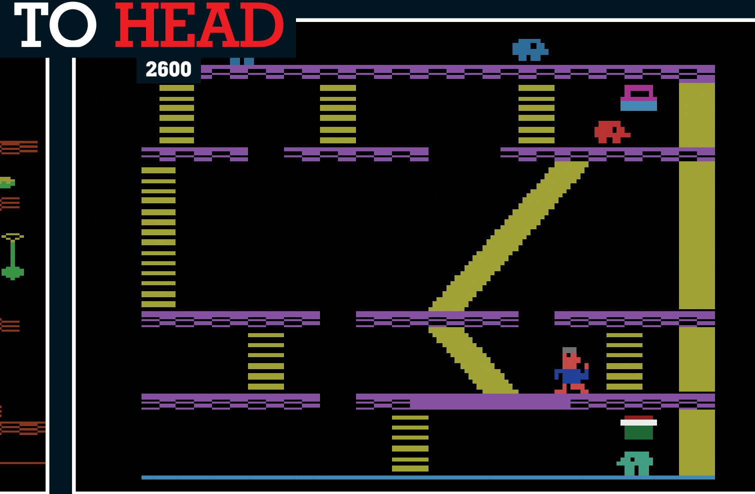
The first thing you notice about this conversion is how sluggish it plays. Bob moves with all the urgency of a kid on his way to have his verrucas frozen off, and, for a game in which he must effectively cover every inch of the playing field with his feet, it makes for some seriously tedious gameplay. Adding to the frustration, Bob's jump only just about clears enemies and some of the gaps between platforms. It is this that really kills e gameplay and makes this version incredibly frustrating and unfairly challenging.

There are actually two versions of *Miner 2049er* on the console. When developer Tigervision decided to port the game to the Atari 2600, it discovered that it could only squeeze three levels onto its 4k cartridges. Because of this a second volume was released that contained an additional three stages. Though still quite a bit short of the ten stages in the original, in this case that's probably a blessing in disguise.

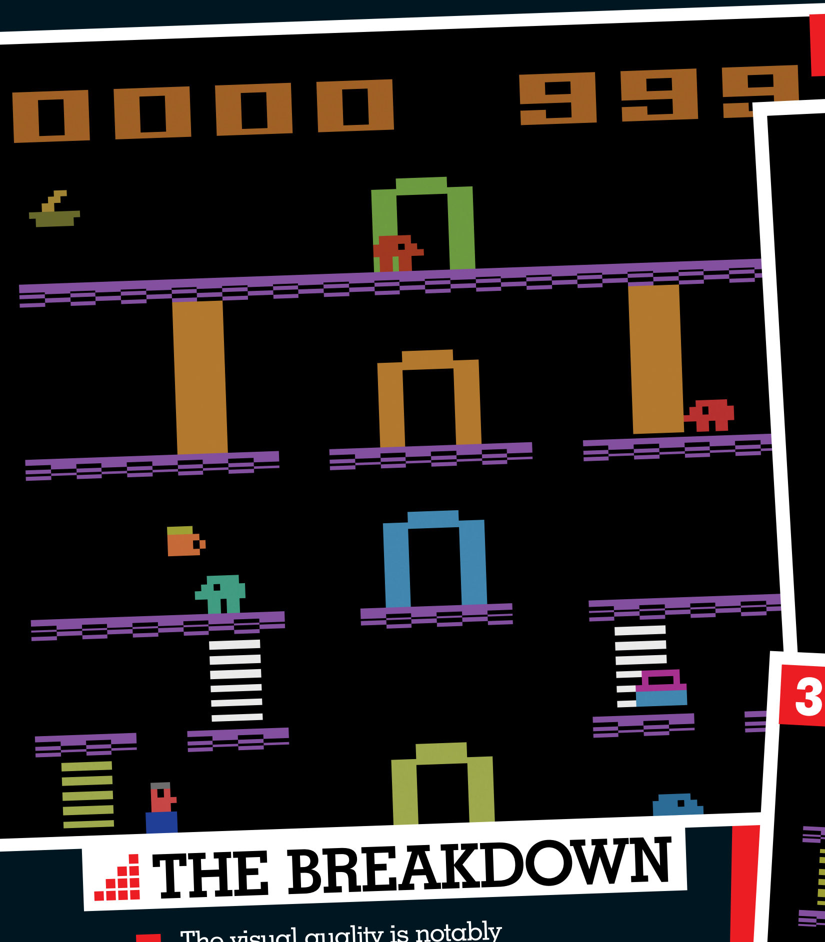
HEAD TO HEAD



ARCADE



2600



THE BREAKDOWN

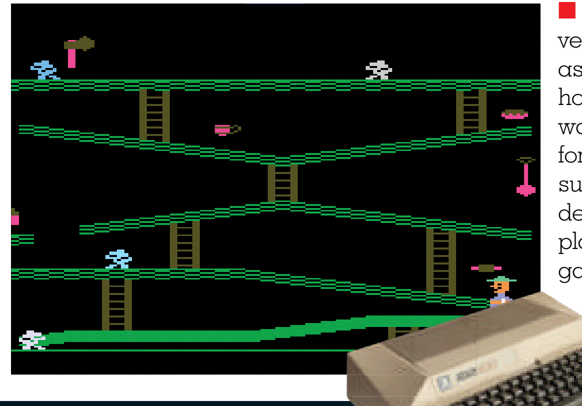
1 The visual quality is notably reduced from the Atari 8-bit version (which was hardly pushing the visual barrier itself). Bob's not wearing any trousers for starters and, being inside a radioactive mine, that is probably not a wise move. Especially if he plans to make little Bounty Bobs and Bobettes later down the line.

2 What really kills this conversion are the speed and slack game design. As Bob walks at about two frames per minute and his jumps only just clear enemies it can make navigating the mines extremely tedious. Especially as when you die, you have to restart the entire stage from scratch.

3 As only three stages could be fitted onto a 2600 cart, Tigervision released a second volume on the console. Making no effort to improve the game at all, it suffered from the same slow and terrible gameplay as the first, and due to its more intricate stage layouts was even more frustrating.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: **Atari 800** Year: **1982** Publisher: **Big Five Software** Developer: **Bill Hogue**



■ Though the Apple II version beat it to release as a result to production hold up, *Miner 2049er* was originally written for the Atari 800. As such, it really is the definitive version to play. Containing great gameplay and ten stages, this is the way it was intended to be enjoyed.

THE COMPLETE HI

DESPITE STRONG competition from Nintendo and Sega and some genuinely groundbreaking PC releases, 2000 was the year that Sony truly dominated its rivals.

Things were initially looking good for Sega's Dreamcast when it first launched in 1999 and it followed things up with some strong titles in the following years. Arcade-perfect ports of *Crazy Taxi, Marvel Vs Capcom 2, Power Stone 2, Virtua Tennis, Street Fighter: Third Strike* and *Silent Scope* often improved on the original games, while the likes of *Phantasy Star Online, Resident Evil: Code Veronica, Skies Of Arcadia, The Nomad Soul* and *Jet Set Radio* proved it was strong in innovation too.

Sega had a problem, though: Sony. Nintendo had survived Sony's ferocious assault on gaming thanks to its domination of the handheld market, but Sega was having no such luck. Although the Dreamcast was a genuinely fantastic console, it couldn't compete with the promises that had been made by Sony in March 1999 when it first announced the arrival of the PS2. Fed fabulous tales of the 'Emotion Engine' that was promising all sorts of revolutionary gaming, gamers seemed content to put their faith in Sony's new machine and the Dreamcast was struggling to gain momentum.

YEAR IN 20

Sony's machine was released to a wave of hype in March and immediately began selling out in Japan, as manufacturing problems and its sheer popularity meant Sony couldn't keep up with demand. Unlike many other console launches of the time, the US and European launches came fairly quickly (seven and eight months after the Japanese launch), giving Sega little time to build upon the Dreamcast's head start. The launch line-up for Sony's machine wasn't impressive, but it didn't matter: Sony had customer loyalty on its side and a powerful brand name.

This was most notable with the release of the cute miniaturised PSone, unleashed in July in Japan and two months later in other regions. The futuristic design proved a massive boon for Sony's original console and, backed up by the likes of *Final Fantasy IX, Dragon Quest VII* and *Micro Machines*, it continued to sell in the millions, further cementing Sony's dominance in the eyes of gamers.

Nintendo, which had dominated the industry in the late Eighties and early , found itself in second place with eeable way of getting back out

■ The Dreamcast may have been struggling, but games like *Jet Set Radio* proved that Sega's system boasted plenty of innovative games.

■ BioWare's *Baldur's Gate II* was another superb RPG with huge amounts of depth. It was followed by an equally impressive expansion in 2001.

■ Sony's *Final Fantasy IX* was one of the key releases for its six-year old console and made its debut in July. The PAL release would be seven months later.

■ The miniature PSone proved that the PlayStation was still a massively important brand for Sony.

STORY OF GAMES

in front. Strong software like *Perfect Dark*, *Banjo Tooie*, *Paper Mario*, *Sin & Punishment* and *Excitebike 64* ensured that there was a steady trickle of solid games, but the N64 was trailing massively behind Sony's PlayStation, while the release of the PS2 meant that Nintendo had to consider new hardware of its own. The Dolphin had first been announced in 1999, the day after the PS2 in fact, but it would be over a year later before it was officially revealed on 24 August, the day before Nintendo's Space World 2000 show. The GameCube, as it was now known, would not launch until September 2001, giving Sony a massive head start.

Nintendo had also to consider the announcement of Microsoft's Xbox, which was scheduled for release the same month as Nintendo's new console. Bill Gates was making big claims for the machine and Microsoft had already been involved with consoles as Windows helped power the Dreamcast, but the Xbox would be its first proper attempt at a games console and it had no proper experience in the market. Besides, Nintendo also had its Game Boy Advance to consider, which was due out the following year and would hopefully allow it to keep the stranglehold on the handheld market it had enjoyed since the release of the Game Boy. The Xbox would have to wait.

REVIEW
00

While Sony, Nintendo and Sega jostled for console dominance, the PC market was finally coming of age. Graphic advances were continuing to be made, allowing for truly impressive games that just didn't seem possible on consoles. It wasn't just visual fidelity PC was excelling, however. It continued to offer deep immersive experiences that just didn't translate to home consoles. *Shogun: Total War* marked the start of Creative Assembly's massively popular franchise and offered intense strategic battles steeped in rich authenticity, while *Deus Ex* blended the genres of RPG, simulator and first-person shooter to create an astonishing epic that still impresses today. *Sacrifice* was an innovative take on the real-time strategy genre, *The Sims* made gaming accessible to non-traditional gamers and went on to become the most successful PC game of all time, while *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows Of Amn* proved that developer BioWare was well on its way to becoming the saviour of Western RPGs.

Rightly or wrongly, however, all the focus for most of the year was on Sony. Its PS2 was rapidly increasing its user base thanks to a successful Christmas, while the PlayStation was defying the typical belief that the average console had a life expectancy of five years. The Japanese giant seemed unstoppable, but Nintendo and Microsoft were still waiting in the wings…



■ *Perfect Dark* was the spiritual successor to *GoldenEye* and proved to be another essential purchase for N64 owners.

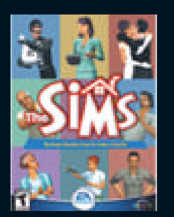


■ The PS2's 'Emotion Engine' never really lived up to its grand promises, but ultimately it didn't need to. Gamers loyally waited for Sony's launch.

DEVELOPER of the YEAR
Will Wright

■ Will Wright may have left the games industry in 2009, but his impact continues to be felt. Starting off in 1984 with *Raid On Bungeling Bay*, he quickly become known for his love of simulators, releasing *SimCity*, *SimEarth*, *SimAnt* and *SimLife* at yearly intervals. His crowning masterpiece for many, however, was *The Sims*.

Released in 2000, *The Sims* proved to be Wright's masterpiece, delivering an amount of depth and complexity that hadn't been seen in any similar game. Wright continued to work on other projects in addition to *The Sims* series, with his last game being the ambitious *Spore*. He left the industry to set up Stupid Fun Club, an entertainment think tank of which he is a principal shareholder.



EXTENDED PLAY: **2000**

THE SIMS

Each month we select one of the most interesting or important games from our year in review… Here we reveal how Will Wright's ambitious life simulator became the most successful PC franchise of all time

THE SIMS represented a pinnacle in Will Wright's career. Ever since the release of *SimCity* in 1989, Wright had thrown himself into the simulation strategy genre, coming up with ever more ambitious ideas. *The Sims* was arguably his crowning achievement, and while Wright's watershed game has long been surpassed by two sequels, its impact on the industry remains impossible to ignore.

The Sims has you starting off by creating your avatar, or Sim, with 20,000 Simoleans (the game's currency). You can create a family of as many people as you like, buy or remodel a house and fill it with all manner of everyday objects, from TVs to fences. 150 different items were originally available in *The Sims*, with more being released for the many expansion packs that Maxis released. It's also possible to create distinct personalities for your Sims, as you can decide how outgoing, neat or active they are. With five traits and ten slots for each, you can create a vast variety of different personalities, ensuring that your tiny avatar immediately comes to life. Once your Sim or Sims have been created, you can sit back and watch them go about their everyday lives, and it is here where Wright's game really comes into its own.

THERE ARE NO REAL SET RULES IN THE SIMS, NO OBJECTIVES

There are no real set rules in The Sims, no objectives; you just let your Sims live the best possible life. This is done by interacting with your Sim and carrying out all sorts of mundane everyday tasks, from feeding them and ensuring they get exercise, to finding suitable jobs and letting them interact with others. The Sims are reasonably free-willed, meaning it's also possible to leave them to their own devices and to make their own decisions. Even now it remains utterly fascinating to watch, but your little avatars aren't very good at prioritising, so they may forget to wash, exercise or even go to work on time. As a result you'll need to effectively manage their lives for them, while keeping an eye on budgets and other important parameters.

It sounds trite, but all this micromanaging becomes amazingly addictive and you can become totally mesmerised by your tiny minions. So much so that you become completely devastated when your Sim dies, because you've invested so much time in them.

The Sims was a revolution on its release, opening up PC gaming to the masses and creating a string of sequels and expansions. There's never been another PC game quite like it, and we're unlikely to see anything similar again.



It's strangely compelling watching a bunch of digital people going about their lives.



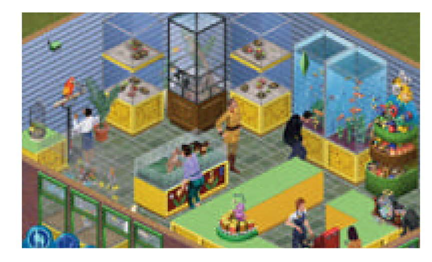
Create a husband and wife and you could watch them argue. Just like in real life.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?



■ In a word a revolution. *The Sims* helped bring gaming to the masses and proved that there were plenty of non-traditional gamers who would happily play something if it caught their attention. Massively popular with women (some cynics suggested it was due to being like a virtual doll's house), it was a game that didn't care about gender, nor whether you were a hardcore or casual gamer; it was just there to be enjoyed.

EA realised the gold mine it was sitting on and released a steady stream of expansions that would slowly add to both the items you could place in your house and improve the game's play mechanics. An official sequel arrived in 2004 and spawned a further eight expansions; *Sims 3* launched in 2009 and also had eight expansions. We'd also argue that the current rise in casual gaming, both via mobile and on social sites like Facebook, has come about due to Wright's massively influential game.



ALSO RELEASED THIS YEAR…

DIABLO II



■ BLIZZARD'S SEQUEL to its PC hit was worth the wait (four years). It offered an insane level of depth compared to its predecessor, more characters and an excellent multiplayer mode. Before the release of *Diablo III* there were just under 10 million people playing on the Battle.net servers.

MARVEL VS CAPCOM 2



■ FOR MANY this remains the ultimate fighting crossover. Sure, the balance is a little off (as you might expect from a roster of nearly 60 characters), but the core gameplay in Capcom's amazingly fun fighter remains incredibly deep and satisfying. It's all rounded off with sterling visuals and a rocking soundtrack.

SKIES OF ARCADIA



■ THIS WAS not only the best RPG (of a handful) on Sega's Dreamcast console, but also one of the best of its generation. Set in a fantastic world of floating islands, flying pirate ships and gargantuan bosses, it boasted glorious visuals, some beautifully written characters and a truly epic story. Where oh where is its sequel?

DEUS EX



■ *HALF-LIFE* may have proved that it was possible to integrate clever stories into an FPS, but it was Ion Storm's *Deus Ex* that pushed the template even further. Expansive RPG elements, a massive emphasis on player choice along with an intelligent plot ensures that even now, *Deus Ex* remains an incredible piece of work.

PHANTASY STAR ONLINE

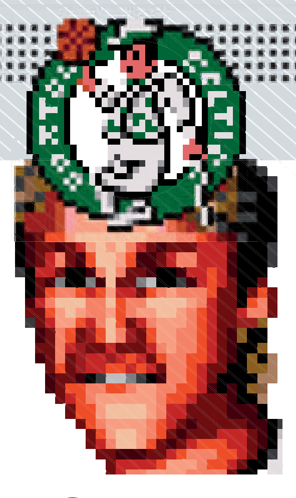


■ THIS WAS a revelation back in 2000. The game world was rich and dynamic, teaming up with other players to take down huge bosses was fresh and exciting, while the lure of all sorts of powerful loot kept you endlessly addicted to the world of Ragol. Even now we shudder over the phone bills we racked up while playing it.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures





DETAILS

FORMAT: Sega Mega Drive
YEAR: 1991
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: In-house
EXPECT TO PAY: £750

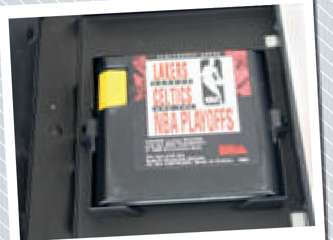


EXHIBIT A: EA didn't localise the look of its yellow tab Mega Drive and Genesis carts. This makes telling them apart very difficult.

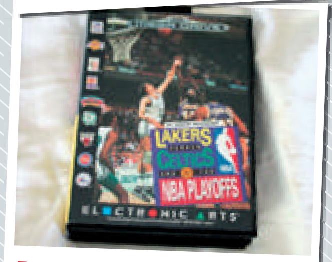


EXHIBIT B: Complete copies are so hard to come by that there is still some doubt over whether *Lakers Vs Celtics* was officially released in PAL territories to begin with.



EXHIBIT C: Our collector is lucky enough to have a complete copy in good condition. As well as the instruction manual he also has the original registration card.

LAKERS VERSUS CELTICS AND THE NBA PLAYOFFS

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Why It's Rare

LAKERS VS CELTICS is a mysterious PAL Mega Drive game, and up until recently had a question mark hanging over its listing on several respected online sources. With no boxed copies of the game surfacing, many assumed it had been listed in error, likely mistaken for the very common NTSC version of the game. This is plausible as not only was importing very popular during the 16-bit era, but Electronics Arts' yellow tab cartridges for the Genesis and Mega Drive are not localised and look identical – even the labels on its Mega Drive games state 'for play on the Sega Genesis System'. The first shred of evidence that a PAL version existed came to light about a year ago, when a collector posted pictures of his boxed copy of the game online, and since then a few more are now known to be in the possession of collectors. One possible explanation as to why so few PAL boxes seem to exist could be that they were only produced for rental outlets and the game never saw widespread release. Whatever the nature of its origin though, *Lakers Vs Celtics* is certainly one of the more intriguing games in PAL Mega Drive collecting.



Worth Playing?

IT WAS an early Mega Drive release from EA, and was the first title in its *NBA Playoffs* series. If reappraising the game in the context of its time of release there can be no doubt it was an impressive and significant basketball simulator. Following in the official footsteps of EA's massively popular *John Madden Football*, it was one of the first basketball games to boast NBA endorsement, and therefore official teams, jerseys, and players that looked like their real life counterparts – some high-profile players could even perform signature moves. Presentation-wise it was also impressive, with detailed player sprites and a realistic-looking court that was decorated with excited spectators, bored subs and animated managers. Where *Lakers Vs Celtics* falls down however is its speed and excitement, or rather its lack of. The gameplay is pretty slow, and it also suffers from jerky animation. There are also a few odd design choices that show its age too, such as the player-character highlighted by the colour of his socks and sneakers, which makes spotting them difficult in the throes of play, and the team AI not feeling as solid as it does in later games in the series.



FACT!

The game's title comes from the legendary rivalry between the Boston Celtics and Los Angeles Lakers, who have met in NBA finals a record 12 times.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Russell Piper**
Occupation: **Business Analyst**

What is it about *Lakers Vs Celtics* and the Mega Drive in particular that is attractive to you?
It is the rarest game in the PAL Mega Drive library, there are only four copies known to exist and up until a year ago it was only a myth. Everyone thought that when the collection lists were pulled together someone had mistakenly included the very common NTSC version. Another collector finally posted a picture of a copy around a year ago on a collector's website.

Please tell us how/where you found the cart?
Somebody was selling around 300 games on eBay for about £3.5k, of which this game was one of them. Much to my wife's fear I was contemplating on buying the entire lot and selling the remaining games to recoup as much as possible. Fortunately for her I managed to convince the seller to sell this game individually.

What condition was the cart in and how much did you pay for it?
The game is in perfect condition, it is complete with the manual and registration card. I paid £750 for it, which I realise is a massive amount of money. However, with so many people attempting to get the full Mega Drive library this game is only going to appreciate. Other collectors, me included, think that if it was allowed to go the distance on eBay it would have gone for well over £1,000.

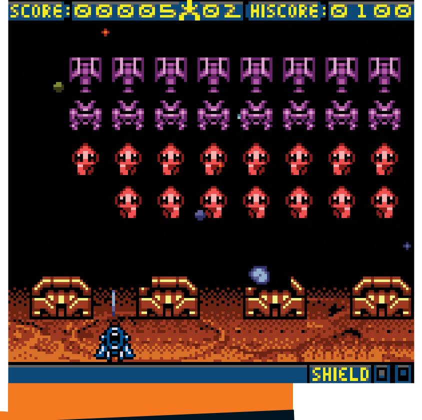
Do you actually play *Lakers Vs Celtics* and, if so, what do you think of it?
I used to play this game quite a lot as a kid as my friend had it. It is not a bad game and is one of the better basketball games on the system. The *NBA Jam* series are my favourite basketball games on the system though.

Would you ever consider selling the cart or is it yours for life?
I see my collection as an investment. I tend to sell them all in 12-15 years time to hopefully put a dent in my children's university education.



THE RISE & FALL OF CRAWFISH INTERACTIVE

GamesTM speaks to the team behind the late Crawfish Interactive, the UK studio responsible for the groundbreaking Game Boy Advance conversion of Street Fighter Alpha 3





The Game Boy Color conversion of *Street Fighter Alpha* was a milestone for the system.

AS THE VIDEOGAME INDUSTRY LURCHES FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT, THE MULTITUDE OF COMPANIES INVOLVED WITH PRODUCING SOFTWARE FOR THE ENDLESS CONVEYOR BELT OF PLATFORMS IS CONSTANTLY SHIFTING. Just as studios are created to cater for the demands of new hardware, established firms are forced to close due to shifting technological boundaries and the inevitable drop in interest for older platforms. Sometimes, these companies collapse because the quality of their output is lacking, but in the case of Croydon-based handheld specialist Crawfish Interactive that certainly wasn't the case.

Crawfish was founded by Australian Cameron Sheppard, who began his career down under at the end of the Eighties. "I started out in the games industry at Beam Software – formerly Melbourne House – in 1989," he recalls. "In 1994 I was given the opportunity to travel to London to work for Probe Software as a freelance programmer, converting *Mortal Kombat II* to the monochrome Game Boy. I had to get my first passport to travel to London, and at age 25 it was my first time abroad. On top of being in a new country for the first time, I wasn't a tourist – *Mortal Kombat II* had a tight deadline of just three months so I spent most of my time in Probe's offices on Tamworth Road, Croydon. Probe's founder Fergus McGovern actually added a clause in my contract that went along the lines of 'We understand that you'd like to do some sightseeing in London but you can't until it's finished.' I decided to stay on programming games in the UK, including the Sega 32X version of *Mortal Kombat II* and a few further projects. In 1995, the publisher Acclaim Entertainment bought Probe, and in March 1997 I decided to incorporate Crawfish Interactive to program games directly for Acclaim."

Croydon was where Sheppard would locate his fledgling studio. Growth was rapid. "I didn't plan on expanding Crawfish at all," Sheppard explains. "That happened when I was offered more than one title at a time, which allowed me to hire some freelance and it went onwards and upwards from there." Sheppard relied on freelance programmers like ex-Probe staffer David Leitch to turn around titles quickly and lend his business some flexibility.

"We had worked on some of the same Probe projects together before Crawfish got started," Leitch explains. "In terms of the projects that I did, I was quite lightly managed. I think I got away with that because I was kind of a known quantity and trusted to get my head down and deliver something that was good and on time. The Crawfish guys would have an initial design for the game, they'd sort out the artwork and audio and handle pretty much all of the day-to-day publisher relations stuff. So I got on and made the game with Crawfish giving me whatever support I needed. And for me, that was close to being an ideal situation."

CAMERON SHEPPARD'S LIFE LESSONS

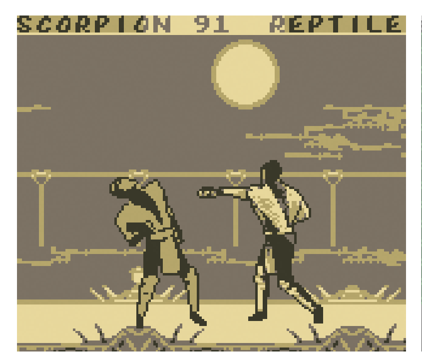
TREAT company cash as if it's yours personally. There may at times be many digits in the bank account, but that's no reason to splash out on new hardware. It could all be gone in two months.

Separate yourself from your staff enough for a boss-employee relationship.

The interest of the company always comes first.

Take some profits as dividends in the good times so that if things go wrong, at least you have something to show for the stress in owning a company. If it weren't for you making the decision to set up and taking the risk, there would be no company.

Keep a tight rein on absolutely everything.



The Game Boy port of *Mortal Kombat II* launched Sheppard into the UK development scene.

WHEN CRAWFISH WAS BORN, THE PORTABLE MARKET WAS RULED BY NINTENDO AND ITS GAME BOY RANGE OF CONSOLES. THE ORIGINAL BLACK AND WHITE CONSOLE WAS STILL A STRONG SELLER, BUT NINTENDO WAS ABOUT TO MOVE ONTO AN UPDATED COLOUR VARIANT. "The black and white Game Boy was the first console I worked on so I didn't have anything to compare it with, and I remember really enjoying developing for it," Sheppard reveals. "The limitations didn't seem major for me at the time and the programmers at Crawfish enjoyed the challenge, especially porting the higher-platform games to the handheld systems." Leitch has equally positive memories of Nintendo's esteemed monochrome portable. "I liked the Game Boy," he says. "The nice thing about that generation of consoles is that if you did something cool or clever in terms of programming or game play, then it really would tend to stand out – it wouldn't be buried under a mountain of polygons. But similarly, if you did something that just plain sucked, there wasn't a lot you could do to hide that, either."

One only has to take a brief glance at the software library of the Game Boy and Game Boy Color to realise that titles based on licenced media properties were continued>





CRAWFISH'S TOP 5 GAMES, AS PICKED BY CRAWFISH

Crawfish produced over 30 games from 1997 to 2002, all of which were on Nintendo portables. According to Sheppard, Merran and Leitch, these are the five best games to emerge from the studio's Croydon offices

ECKS VS. SEVER

(GAME BOY ADVANCE, 2001)

■ BASED ON the movie *Ballistic: Ecks vs. Sever* – which starred Antonio Banderas and Lucy Liu and is one of the most critically panned movies of all time – you might assume that this licenced offering is best avoided. However, Crawfish managed to create a surprisingly entertaining FPS for the GBA, and followed with a similar sequel a year later.



STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 3 UPPER

(GAME BOY ADVANCE, 2002)

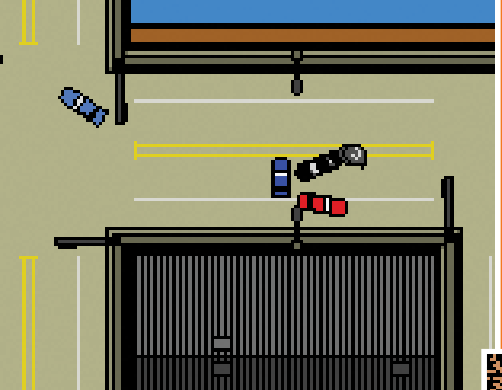
■ IT SEEMED almost inconceivable that one of the biggest 2D fighters of the era could be ported to the Game Boy Advance, but Crawfish did it. This conversion retains all of the gameplay of the arcade original, even adding additional characters in the form of Eagle, Maki and Yun.



DRIVER

(GAME BOY COLOR, 2000)

■ THERE WAS no question of Crawfish porting the PlayStation version of *Driver* to the Game Boy Color, but what the company did come up with was almost as entertaining. The 2D, top-down viewpoint is something of a change, but the game plays brilliantly and is well worth seeking out.



STREET FIGHTER ALPHA: WARRIOR'S DREAMS

(GAME BOY COLOR, 2000)

■ LIKE *BUST-A-MOVE 4*, this conversion inexplicably lacks a two-player link cable option, but that's really the only negative you can level at it. Considering the lowly nature of the hardware, this is a stunning achievement which continues to impress even today.



BUST-A-MOVE 4

(GAME BOY COLOR, 1999)

■ THE FOURTH version of Taito's famous match-three puzzler was converted to the Game Boy Color in 1999, and sadly lacked a mulitplayer mode. Even so, it remains a solid conversion of an established genre classic, and worthy of a look if you're in the market for handheld puzzle classics.



massive business, and it was into this realm which Crawfish thrust itself. "Licenced games seemed to be about the only ones being offered during Crawfish's time, so they formed a large portion of our income and therefore continued existence and success," Sheppard reveals. Conversions of established home console titles also featured heavily. "Since the games had to be modified and cut down we had to be creative, and most of the time we could ride the larger platforms' advertising and exposure, which was a positive experience," Sheppard adds. Leitch agrees. "I think we were cut quite a lot of slack," he says. "For example, *Driver*, as most people will know, was a big PlayStation game; a 3D graphics and realistic physics extravaganza. And we're trying to recreate something of that on a little 2D system with some hardware scrolling and a handful of sprites. Nobody seriously expected us to attempt a straight conversion, so we concentrated on doing something that was true to the spirit of the licence that also made the best use of the Game Boy Color

"THE NICE THING ABOUT THAT GENERATION OF CONSOLES IS THAT IF YOU DID SOMETHING COOL… THEN IT REALLY WOULD TEND TO STAND OUT"
Cameron Sheppard, Crawfish Interactive

hardware. The only issue we had on that project was that Reflections, who developed the original, maybe got a little bit too enthusiastic about it. They saw some of the production milestones, really liked them and wanted us to try and leverage our system a little bit more. It was very flattering but we were pushed for time and everybody moved on. Ironically, if it had been the turkey everyone had expected, we'd probably have heard a lot less from them."

THANKS TO PROJECTS LIKE DRIVER, CRAWFISH MANAGED TO CARVE OUT A STERLING REPUTATION WITHIN THE UK DEVELOPMENT INDUSTRY, GAINING THE RESPECT OF GAMERS AND THE PRESS ALIKE. Sheppard is keen to stress that the company's fame wasn't purely to do with the quality of its output. "I think it's important to mention that Crawfish's continued presence in the media was largely due to our PR agent, Alison Beasley at Lincoln Beasley PR," he states. "Without Alison's valuable help we would not have been as well known as we were." Clearly Beasley's work – no doubt made easier by the relatively high standard of Crawfish's games – had the desired effect; the firm was getting noticed by some very influential people. "Meeting Nintendo in Japan in 2001 was when our success really hit home," Sheppard says. "I travelled to Japan with some other game developers as part of the Digital Content Trade Mission to Japan, where each of us presented our company's technology to Japanese business people at the British Embassy there in Tokyo. Out of the assembled developers, Nintendo selected me to meet them at their headquarters in Kyoto, only because they had seen so much of what Crawfish was doing on its beloved handheld machines. It was around about this time that I started to fantasize about being bought out by Nintendo itself, becoming Croydon's second success story after Probe's acquisition by Acclaim, but it wasn't to be!"

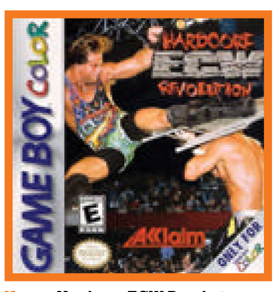
Around this time, Mike Merren joined Crawfish as director of development. "I started in the industry in 1987 working for Mirrorsoft and then as a producer for Virgin Interactive from 1991," he explains. "While there I worked with Revolution Software on *Broken Sword* and Archer Maclean on *Jimmy White's Cueball*. I then moved to Croydon and worked for Acclaim Studios in '98, where Cam had been, but we'd never actually met." The studio Merren found himself in was much larger than the one started by Sheppard in 1997. The reason for this rapid expansion was down to Crawfish's reputation; as it grew, it was predictably courted by other publishers, allowing Sheppard and his team to emerge from under Acclaim's wing. "The first publishers I signed titles for included Activision, Midway continued>



Name: Aliens: Thanatos Encounter
Release: 2001



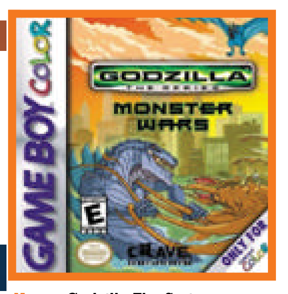
Name: Ecks vs Sever
Release: 2001



Name: Hardcore ECW Revolution
Release: 2000



Name: Ecks Vs Sever II Ballistic
Release: 2002



Name: Godzilla The Series: Monster Wars
Release: 2000



Aliens: Thanatos Encounter brought some scares to Game Boy Color owners.



and Crave, and Acclaim were fine with that," explains Sheppard.

One of Crawfish's most famous clients was Capcom, who entrusted the studio with the Game Boy Color conversion of *Street Fighter Alpha: Warrior's Dreams* in 2000. The triumph of this venture led to another, more significant project. "The deal for *Street Fighter Alpha 3* on the Game Boy Advance was great and the agreed royalty rate meant that it was going to be Crawfish's big break into the real money," explains Sheppard. "I was over the moon that I managed to sign such a deal, even meeting Capcom at their offices in Osaka. Unfortunately, for reasons that I am still unaware of, the development went horribly wrong and it not only missed the release date but also the release year. It shouldn't have happened; it was a conversion where we had access to the entire source – code and art – and even hired

"STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 3 ON THE GAME BOY ADVANCE WAS GREAT… IT WAS GOING TO BE CRAWFISH'S BIG BREAK INTO THE REAL MONEY"
Cameron Sheppard, Crawfish Interactive

an additional programmer to solely write the run-time data compression which was crucial for quality graphics and sound.

Capcom were rightly furious and summoned myself and Mike to a meeting with them at a trade show in 2002 – which wasn't pleasant – and we were told that the development fee was cut and the royalty effectively cancelled." Ironically, when the game was eventually released at the end of 2002, it gained widespread critical acclaim.

THE SPAT WITH CAPCOM WOULD HAVE SEVERE FINANCIAL RAMIFICATIONS FOR CRAWFISH, AS WOULD THE COMPLEXITIES OF TRANSITIONING FROM ONE HARDWARE GENERATION TO THE NEXT. For a company that was so invested in the Game Boy Color, shifting focus to the brand new Game Boy Advance was not easy. "On one hand it was great that the handheld market was growing up and that Crawfish was in the best place to capitalize on this, but it also posed a unique problem," explains Sheppard. "New hardware always causes problems with games development, as publishers drop support for the existing hardware when new hardware is announced and delay signing titles until they can be sure that the new hardware is going to be successful. In the case of the GBA, this caused a lull in signing new titles and since Crawfish's focus was only on the Game Boy line, revenue suffered."



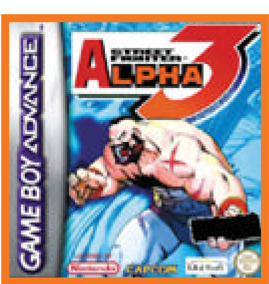
■ Crawfish's conversion of *Street Fighter Alpha 3* was technically incredible. It's only really let down by a lack of buttons.



Name: Godzilla The Series
Release: 1999



Name: Ed, Edd n Eddy Jawbreakers
Release: 2003



Name: Street Fighter Alpha 3
Release: 2002



Name: Superman Countdown to Apokolips
Release: 2003



In fact, things became so dire that in 2002 Sheppard began to look for a buyer in order to save the company's fortunes. "I was in serious talks with a British developer towards the end of Crawfish's life as I knew that without something drastic we would cease trading," he recalls sadly. "It nearly happened but during my last meeting the deal fell through for certain reasons. I was stunned as I then knew that I had to cease trading the next day, laying off all employees and notifying the freelancers and suppliers. Perhaps my most depressing memory of the whole Crawfish saga was my train trip back from that final meeting on a wet, grey and miserable afternoon, ignoring the calls from my bank manager who was ringing to see how it went." Merran has equally sad memories. "It was awful, telling everyone it was over," he says. "I will never forget that. There were a few people that were in tears. Everyone went down the pub afterwards, had a few drinks. The odd bit of gallows humour came out, but generally people drank a beer and sat in shock."

And so ended the story of one of most talented portable codeshops the UK has ever seen. The team splintered and separated, although Sheppard would find himself reunited with Leitch – who had left Crawfish before it shifted focus to the GBA – shortly afterwards. "I went to Climax Studios, to their handheld division," Sheppard recalls. "I departed around mid 2003 and then an opportunity arose to set up another games development company called Razorback Developments with two other directors, Dave Leitch being one of them." Again


The Crawfish team back in the day. That day being when the team forgot they weren't part of a Nineties Brit pop band.

based in Croydon, a large part of Razorback's focus was – you guessed it – handheld consoles. "We specialized in games for the GBA and DS, but more kids-and-family-orientated material," Leitch explains. "Cam left after a couple of years, but the rest of us kept on with it and we did okay commercially, but didn't get anywhere near the critical acclaim that Crawfish earned. The bottom started to fall out of DS development budgets in 2009 and by 2010 we decided that the sensible thing to do was call it a day." In 2010 Sheppard moved back to his native Australia, where he has become involved in various pursuits. "I did some non-games-industry projects, including working as an extra in TV and film strangely enough, which I'm still doing," he says. "I've also just finished a three month full-time course in electronics. I have to get serious with something though, and I have a few options."

HAD CRAWFISH MANAGED TO SURVIVE TO THE PRESENT DAY, WHAT KIND OF COMPANY WOULD IT BE?

"It's difficult to say really, things are so different today," replies Sheppard. Merren feels that the studio would have endured had it not stumbled during the GBA era. "You look at the timing of the closure and if we had survived another year or two, the Nintendo DS was coming along and that would have been a natural jump," he says. "Also, some of the staff that went on to form Climax Handheld worked with Intel and ATI on some initial mobile phone work that was pushing technology closer to what we see on iOS today. In hindsight, I would love to think we would have been at the cutting edge of the initial iPhone business."

Even so, Crawfish's former director of development isn't sure that he would relish the prospect of fighting it out in the portable arena now. "The big issue is the phone side is saturated," he says. "As a consumer, it's great there are so many apps available that you are spoilt for choice. But as a developer, you almost need to be producing twenty titles a year, and hoping one will stick." Leitch shares his former colleague's scepticism. "iOS game development might seem like the equivalent scale of endeavour to what Crawfish did on handhelds, but the business model for most of the companies involved in it is very different," he explains. "You've got companies like Mobius (now Rockstar Leeds) and Vicarious Visions (now owned by Activison) who were Crawfish's competitors ten years ago, and they're both doing big console stuff these days. So my crystal ball is not clear on this one. I think the rise of iOS has changed it a lot, for better and worse. It's obviously a whole lot easier to get small games published these days, but the massive volume of product that it has led to and the amount of it that's free – or as good as free – has made the likely returns less predictable." Perhaps it's a blessing that Crawfish is no longer around to contest what is becoming an increasingly cutthroat business; the company's life was short, but it contributed some remarkable games to the handheld arena.

GRAND THEFT ABORTED

CRAWFISH'S ABILITY TO turn the most basic of concepts into a living, breathing project didn't go unnoticed by publishers. This allowed the company to be more choosy about what it tackled, and also attracted more work. "Around the time the GBA was establishing itself, we did actively go after some known titles as well, such as the Cinemaware and Bitmap Brothers games," explains Mike Merren. "A lot of the time a publisher would come to us asking for a pitch on a title, and we would put something together – sometimes within a matter of a day or two – and a week later we would be ready to sign the contract. Even within this though we still had a lot of creative freedom on titles. *Ecks vs. Sever* was an original design by Crawfish, which was worked on prior to the film even having a full greenlight." Such was the company's skill with creating original projects on humble hardware that the firm was entrusted with what is now one of the most popular videogame franchises of all time. "Towards the end we had been given the opportunity to do an original story for an all-new *Grand Theft Auto* on the GBA," reveals Merren. "It was four months into production when the company closed."






Ecks vs. Sever refined the good work done in the first game.

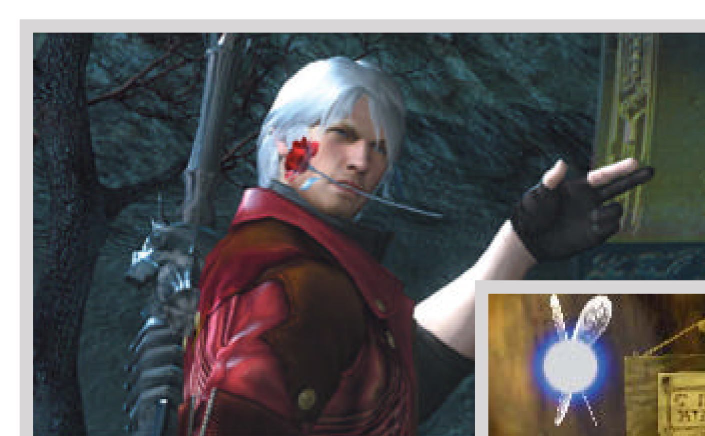
ESSENTIALS

10 OF THE BIGGEST IDIOTS IN GAMING

While the likes of Mario and Sonic have survived generations of gaming by remaining paradigms of virtuousness, not all videogames are so dignified in their characterisation. Whether by conscious decision or not, some characters seem to be created solely to test the patience of the player, constantly pestering, goading and interfering with the actual enjoyment of the game. Frankly, they're just a bunch of assholes.



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Dante
Game: Devil May Cry
Developer: Capcom

1 We can't deny that we outright love Dante, but we can't ignore the fact that the guy is, well, a bit of a jerk at heart. You'd be hard pressed to find another videogame protagonist who can rival the bleach-haired demon-decimator in terms of arrogance, piousness and being outright cocky to the nth degree. But in fairness he's earned that right, channelling his self-assured swagger into his unholy ability to massacre a room of otherworldly creatures in a matter of seconds. If there's a point to be made with Dante it's that sometimes being an asshole is a good thing. Some of the time.

Vincent
Game: Catherine
Developer: Atlus

2 The accomplishments of Vincent's static lifestyle could be written on the back of a first class stamp. *Catherine* paints Vincent in such a selfish, unsympathetic light that it's ensured that from the outset he's something of an unlikeable lead. It becomes even harder to empathise with this idling profligate as soon as he starts bedding another lady behind the back of his doting girlfriend, which ultimately locks his fragile psyche into a nightmarish labyrinth that he spends the game trying desperately to escape. Karma is a bitch.

Navi
Game: Zelda: Ocarina Of Time
Developer: Nintendo

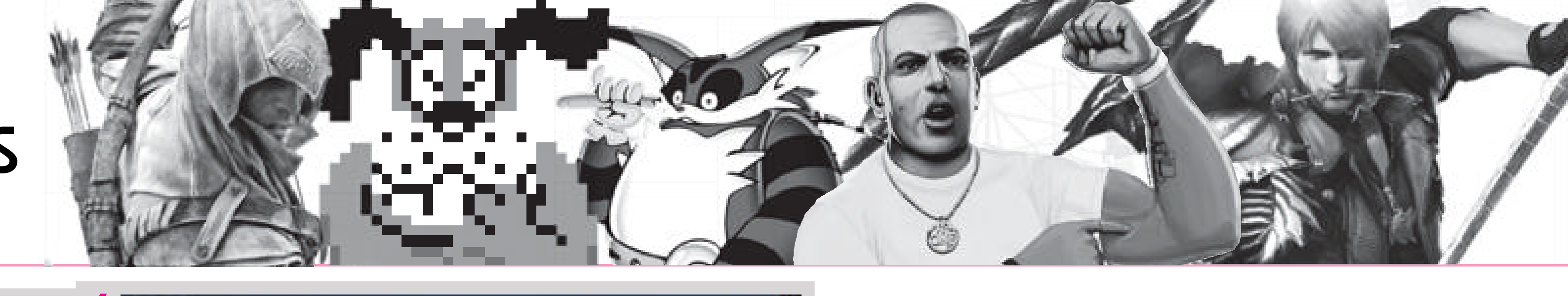
3 This floating migraine with wings is never short of a word to say or a demand to bark at the Saviour of Hyrule, such is her unrelenting burden to shrill in Link's ear the very moment she supposes you might be deviating from your quest to save the land. It's not just the fact she's the most persistent offender of stating the bloody obvious in the complete history of videogames, but it's the overriding condescending tone that has the unfortunate habit of grating the most. Hey! Listen! *Just shut up!*

Achilles
Game: Assassin's Creed III
Developer: Ubisoft

4 What kind of an obnoxious jackass would ignore the desperate pleas of a young man seeking his help with such pig-headed persistence? Achilles, that's who. It's only after knocking on roughly three doors, four windows, climbing up every side of a house, sleeping in a dank barn twice and murdering several unwelcome marauders that the old codger deems you worthy of his attention. Your reward for such patience? Being told rather bluntly that you must execute your own father. Wasn't really worth bothering with, was it?

MIPS
Game: Super Mario 64
Developer: Nintendo

5 Who the hell does this guy think he is? Appearing out of nowhere in the lowest depths of Princess Peach's castle, this cottontail crook is the bane of Mario's Nintendo 64 adventure, running through the palace inciting pure anarchy everywhere he hops. Appearing on only two occasions, there's no reason or rhyme to his presence; he's just a slippery little son-of-a-bitch withholding precious gold stars for no reason other than shits and giggles. It's a wonder Mario didn't wring his neck when he eventually caught up with him.



Alan Wake
Game: Alan Wake
Developer: Remedy Ent.

6 It takes a stratospheric ego to be someone so self-important that they find it necessary to narrate their own existence, but then Alan Wake isn't like most other people. While a pompous blowhard at the best of times, he's also a complete douche of a friend. He berates, interrupts and insults the ethereal presence of his long-time agent, who only materialises to assist Wake in escaping the nightmarish trap he's found himself in.

Handsome Jack
Game: Borderlands 2
Developer: Gearbox Software

7 Common parlance describes someone who wilfully inconveniences themselves to purposely irritate, goad and provoke with the intention of causing a mass amount of destruction as one thing: a troll. That's Handsome Jack: the motor-mouthed megalomaniac who spends the majority of the sequel's playtime plaguing the player's earlobes with cruel jibes, jokes and sinister threats. If that's not a clear enough indicator of asshole status, then check out that ill-judged goatee on his stapled-on face.

Brucie
Game: Grand Theft Auto IV
Developer: Rockstar

8 There isn't another character in any of *Grand Theft Auto*'s versatile cities as overzealous and vainglorious as Brucie Kibbutz. A 'roid-fuelled, juiced-up fitness fanatic who is perhaps the most colourful character to ever grace the streets of Liberty City. His klaxon-like ability to spread pure ignorance is just part of his charming character, one possessing a multitude of personality disorders and exudes an embarrassing amount of false machismo at nearly every turn. Now, if someone could convince him to keep his shirt on, we'd just about be able to tolerate him.

Dog
Game: Duck Hunt
Developer: Nintendo

9 For many, the unnamed canine companion to light-gun game *Duck Hunt* was the first character that they had ever seen. It was also the first time that players would feel the crushing agony of being mocked by a computer. It doesn't matter whether you were a crack-shot for ten rounds in a row; the very moment you missed on duck this pooch would emerge chuckling at your failure. The fact you could never take a shot at him remains one of gaming's greatest injustices.

All Of Sonic's Friends
Game: Sonic franchise
Developer: Sega

10 Sonic should never have said a word. It was only after the spiky-blue blur uttered his first words (outside of the cartoon) that the floodgates opened for all manner of creatures to join the posse. Vector the Crocodile. Big the Cat. Charmy Bee. Nack the Weasel. Mighty the Armadillo. Unsurprisingly, all of these creations ripped straight from Sega's Pointless Anthropomorphic Character Generator are just irritating reductions of the eponymous hedgehog. No wonder Sonic runs so fast, we'd be sprinting for the hills if we ever saw one of these insipid sycophantic bastards approaching.

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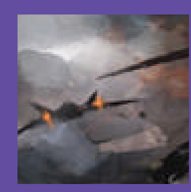


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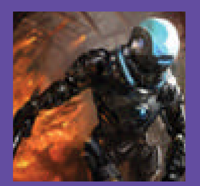
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MARVEL
HEROES
As the superhero mash-up continues its extensive Beta phase, games™ investigates the much-anticipated Marvel MMO

MMO Expansions ROUND-UP

GAMES™ WEIGHS IN ON SOME OF THE MOST ESSENTIAL EXPANSION PACKS OF THE COMING MONTHS

Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn

1 EVEN AS *Final Fantasy* cycles through intermittent instalments and irrelevant spin-offs, the series continues to be consumed in large numbers. But despite such enduring popularity, even the biggest Chocobo-fan would likely balk at the idea of returning to the much-derided *FF XIV* – the series' second MMO universe that arrived over two years ago to a critical mauling. Its reception came as something of a surprise to the developers at Square Enix, but after an internal shake-up it has returned to the troubled MMO with a renewed creativity.

A Realm Reborn seeks to fix it so it can compete with the likes of *Rift* and *Guild Wars 2*. At the time of writing, the original *Final Fantasy XIV* game has been shut down – killed off by a giant meteor strike – while Square works on the new version, to be released simultaneously on PC and PlayStation 3 in mid 2013. Living up to its name, *A Realm Reborn* has new classes, a crazily beautiful new graphics engine, overhauled animation, new maps, new assets, new quests and dungeons, a PvP system, and a new interface so you can actually work out what the hell is going on. And, yes, the Limit Break system is finally being introduced, with its hyperbolic special effects.

The game's producer, Naoki Yoshida, is aware how desperate circumstances are. "We won't make a mistake like *FFXIV* again," he told Joystiq. "If we did, it would be like at the level of destroying the company." The beta is likely to be released at the end of January.



"And, yes, the Limit Break system is finally being introduced, with its hyperbolic special effects"

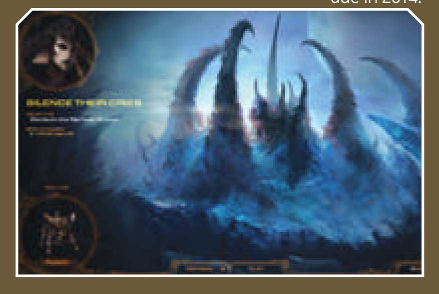
StarCraft II: Heart Of The Swarm

2 IT'S NOT strictly an MMO , but given the hordes of multiplayer fans waiting for it, it may as well be. This much-delayed expansion to *StarCraft II* has been in heavy beta testing pretty much since the game came out and has seen more changes than the guard at Buckingham Palace.

Its single-player element will focus on Kerrigan, one-time ghost and former leader of the Zerg, and her vengeance for her betrayal in *StarCraft I*. The B-movie plot follows on directly from that of *StarCraft II*. Kerrigan's Zerg infestation has been removed, but this had led to the division of the Zerg swarm into several smaller factions, under powerful Queens. In order to secure her revenge against Arcturus Mengsk, she must regain control of her horde while trying to maintain her humanity (or not – you choose).

For multiplayer gamers, the expansion is introducing a new clan and group system. More importantly, there are new units for all races (though many have been dropped in beta-testing). The Terrans get a Hellbat – an upgraded Hellion that transforms into an armoured robot – and a Widow Mine akin to a small mobile burrowing turret. The Protoss get three new ships: the anti-economy Oracle, the super long-ranged Tempest and the defensive Mothership Core. The Zerg get the Swarm Host, a burrowing siege unit that endlessly spawns short-lived Zerg; and the flying Viper, a disruption unit. The expansion is due for release on 12 March.

■ The next *StarCraft* expansion is due in 2014.





MMO UPDATES

THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

Lord Of The Rings Online: Riders Of Rohan

3 TO MAKE its late 2012 launch date, to coincide with the cinema release of *The Hobbit*, the Riders Of Rohan expansion saw some of its content dropped. The missing material (mainly half the story instances, which all call back to *The Hobbit*) is due to be released in February.

Then players will get to explore the forest of Fangorn, follow in the footsteps of the Fellowship… and watch it break up, from multiple perspectives – Sam, Frodo, even Boromir. Given that the past few years of *LOTRO* have involved side characters only, it's great that they're back to the meat of the story.

The biggest mechanical change to the game is the addition of mounted combat. This isn't surprising given the Rohan region's heritage in the Tolkien universe, a wide grassy area almost designed for armies to rampage across it. Players have had mounts before, but now they can take on enemies with heavy, medium or light war-steeds that level up themselves (even their bridles can level up!).

Turbine has learned from more recent rivals like *Guild Wars 2* and *Rift* and introduced roving bands of enemies. These are open-world events with minions and bosses to fight, for max-level characters (now 85, in *ROR*). There are new areas to visit, dotted with great mead halls, and a destroyed town called Hytbold for players to rebuild how they wish.

It's a great expansion to one of the classic MMOs – let's hope Turbine make a Hobbit of it.



Rohan is all about the equestrian steed.

"Given the previous focus on side characters, it's great that Sam, Frodo etc are back to the meat of the story"

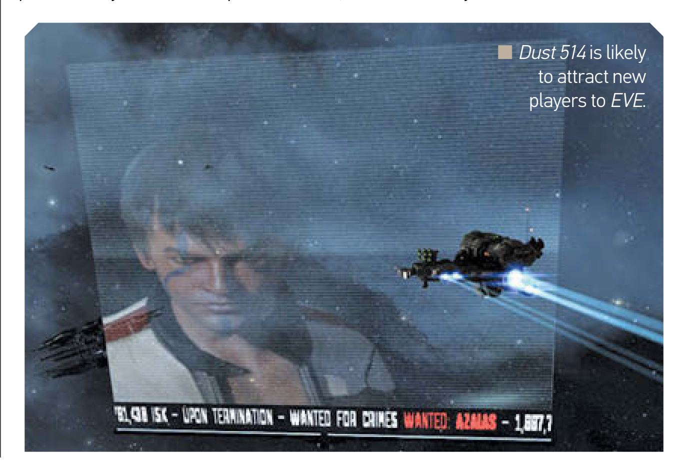
EVE Online: Retribution

4 *EVE* IS a game that invites superlatives. It's the only MMO to grow every year, the only one that runs globally on its own supercomputer (the Infinity cluster in London), the only one where the players seem to have more power than the developers, and the only one that's nearly impossible for new players to start. Beginning to play *EVE* is like being browbeaten by an intellectual bully.

CCP's new expansion, *Retribution*, seeks to fix that. It's revamping the interface to the game, as well as simplifying some of the weirder aspects. For example, Crimewatch, the in-game judicial system, now makes clear what the consequences of a player's actions are. Every single ship has been rebalanced to ensure that all the hull-types see some service, and the NPC AI has been rejigged to take advantage of these changes.

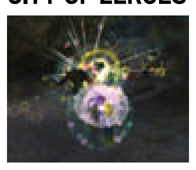
Players can also take on the roles of bounty hunters, temporarily or as a full career choice. As this is *EVE*, players can put out hits on other pilots, corporations and alliances, with bidding taking place on the open market. A bounty on your head means that your name, portrait and reward are broadcast publicly across the *EVE* universe. As players don't get killed permanently, bounties are paid out as a proportion of the money a player loses when they die – a big bounty can leave a player being harassed across the whole galaxy!

The game is also being prepped for integration with the forthcoming PS3 shooter *Dust: 514*; we'll have more information for you on that as it comes, so stay tuned.



Dust 514 is likely to attract new players to *EVE*.

CITY OF ZEROES



Old favourite *City Of Heroes* finally closed in December, despite the game still appearing profitable and notwithstanding huge fan protests. The final hours saw a massive alien invasion, which the city's heroes easily fought off, before the plug was pulled on the servers.

MINECRAFT PREQUEL TO RELEASE



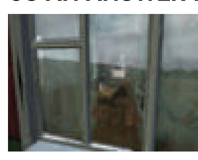
Notch's and Mojang's first project, the hardcore open-world crafting game *Wurm Online* looks to be finally leaving beta after six years. At the same time, Mojang's new project *0x10c*, a sci-fi *Minecraft* with a user-programmable world, may well be subscription-based.

PROJECT BLACKSTONE



Blizzard's mysterious 'Project Titan' (which the *World Of Warcraft* creators have worked on since at least 2007 and which is expected for release Christmas 2013) is still in the middle of development, with over 100 developers working on it, but is in a playable form. This month, the company could be seen snatching up the web rights to 'Project Blackstone'. We've no idea what this means.

DAY Z, DAY Z, GIVE US AN ANSWER DO



DayZ, the outrageously popular zombie-survivalist mod for *ARMA II*, was meant to be getting a commercial release in late 2012 at the time of writing, but the developers didn't seem sure. "We will slip the date if needed," said creator Dean Hall, whose team have been moving to a new server-based engine at the last moment. Honestly, it's not like the dead to drag their feet!

Teaming up, at the moment, is fun but minimally interactive. Bosses and enemies get buffed to balance team sizes.

Marvel Heroes

DIABOLICAL PLANS ARE AFOOT IN THE MARVEL UNIVERSE – AND IT'LL TAKE ALL THE HEROES OUT THERE TO STOP THEM!

Though you probably haven't heard of David Brevik before, you've almost certainly heard of his earlier games; he's the brains behind *Diablo I* and *II*, though not *III*. Indeed, you may have heard his opinion of *Diablo III* – "some of the decisions they have made are not the decisions I would make, and there have been changes in philosophy and that hasn't gone over very well…" – and wondered whether he's got the trousers to back up that mouth. Well, *Marvel Heroes* is his attempt to do so, and he's proving that he knows what he's talking about.

Taking the principles of the hugely popular *Diablo* and putting them in the Marvel universe seems a no-brainer – but in reality, mixing licensed characters with a mechanic that requires them to be engaged in almost constant combat is hugely risky. It's going to be difficult to maintain the long-term appeal of characters when you're endlessly battling the same villains.

Thankfully, Brevik's team seem to have nailed it. They've recreated the Marvel universe as well as in any game we've seen and certainly been as faithful to the source material as *Injustice: Gods Among Us* is being to DC. You choose your initial character from a small roster, including Scarlet Witch, Hawkeye, The Thing and several other heroes. Other premium characters such as Wolverine and the Hulk have to be bought from the in-game store. Yet more heroes, like Spider-Man, appear in cut-scenes but aren't yet available to play.

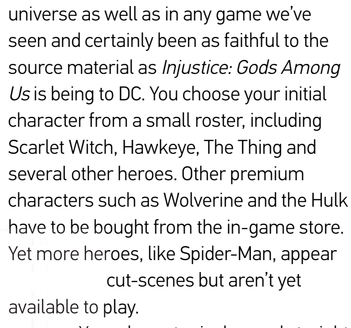
Your character is dropped straight into the world at the RAFT, the high-security prison where the Marvel universe's worst baddies are crammed. Of course, they've broken free and you have to put them away – starting with Living Laser, who's smuggled himself into the Raft's computer system. Do so and you find out that many of the worst villains have escaped; during a short play session, we fought Shocker, Doctor Octopus and Venom, each packing an authentic range of powers.

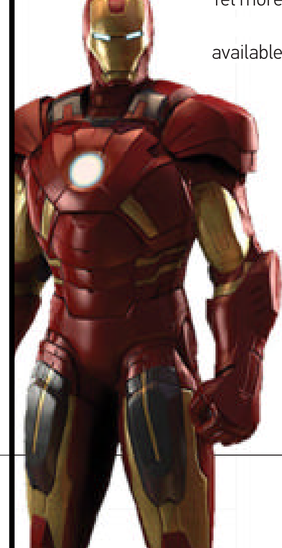
The combat in the short beta session we played certainly had that *Diablo* simplicity about it. Left-mouse moves when clicked on the ground or does a default attack when clicked on an enemy, right-mouse a second attack, while a line of keys can take a range of others. As you level up, you can unlock or level up your powers too, and different costume elements can bolster your powers or even equip you with powers that you've not unlocked yet.

AGAIN, GIVEN that *Diablo* heritage, as you explore the world you encounter large numbers of enemy mobs. You can defeat these with your powers or with environmental elements (such as tossing cars about). Sometimes you'll encounter mini-bosses, typically packs of minions with a special power and a greater chance of dropping rare items. And items drop all the time, so that by the end of each mission the necessity pops up to do a loot-run, via your

INFORMATION

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **Gazillion Entertainment**
DEVELOPER: **In-house**
ORIGIN: **US**









[Left] Only in the Marvel universe could a man with a bow and arrow be more lethal than one with machine gun… Oh, and the DC universe.

[Below] Superteams don't have to be balanced - but it's useful having at least one tank like The Thing, The Incredible Hulk or Deadpool.

"Casual multiplayer and no up-front cost for endless play… but we're not sure what long-term appeal it will have"



Missions aren't just about brainless killing. At higher levels, power management becomes very important.



friendly neighbourhood teleporters, back to the nearest shop-character (drawn from Marvel's huge roster of heroes that no one would really want to play as, like Vision) to sell. There's a stash here as well, so you can store costumes and equipment your current character can't use, and crafting materials for creating more costumes.

So, like *Diablo*, this is a familiar clickfest. There are caveats. We're not convinced about the long-term lifespan of *Marvel Heroes*; the amount of content at launch is large, but shallow. Given this is the *Diablo* genre, the variety of combat is slight, only leavened by your character's levelling up and unlocking new abilities. Yes, to vary this, you can buy other characters for your roster using real-world money, but they all start at the base level compared to your initial hero, meaning it's likely you'll have to grind earlier areas for a bit to get them up to speed. If you like *World Of Warcraft*'s time-eating mechanics, then this won't be a problem for you.

SECONDLY, AND more worryingly, the game looks like a browser game - no better than *City Of Steam* that we looked at last issue and slightly too zoome and low-detail to appreciate the costumes you're creating and buying. This is alleviated somewhat by the simplicity of Marvel's iconic characters and also by the regular animated cut-scenes that occur as the plot continues, but is mostly off-putting.

Multiplayer is key to *Marvel Heroes*, so we enjoyed a short session with another player whom we met in the beta world. Fighting Venom with him, we saw that the boss had adapted to take our party into account, becoming much tougher and having more regular spawns of minions. It was all pure *Diablo*.

Marvel Heroes is certainly looking promising with casual multiplayer and no up-front cost for endless play. Yet it's an extremely simple game and we're not sure what long-term appeal it will have, when games like *PlanetSide 2* are on the market. We wait for the heroes to prove us wrong.

THE UBIQUITY OF COMIC-BOOK CULTURE

Go to your bookstore and comics dominate, not merely as graphic novels, but as novelisations. Go to the movies, and the blockbusters derive from comics. Thankfully, music hasn't been infiltrated by the trend (and we're not sure how we'd know if it had), but it's obvious that games are also a suitable target, with *DC Universe Online*, the upcoming *Deadpool* game from High Moon, *Marvel Avengers Alliance*, *Injustice*, *Young Justice* and many more. The problem is, barring *Arkham City* and *Lego Batman*, most comic games have been cheap and cynical tie-ins to movie marketing campaigns. Of course, it goes both ways, with only movies yet to succumb to passable games crossovers. We're hoping both of these change.



GUILD CHAT

The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today



Atli Már Sveinsson,

Creative director, CCP Games

Announced at E3 2011, CCP Games is still hard at work on PlayStation 3 exclusive EVE Online spin-off Dust 514. Creative director Atli Már Sveinsson discusses with **games™** the effect the first-person shooter MMO will have on EVE's community

How do you think the *EVE* community feels about other people playing 'their' game?
We've interacted with the community and we meet them at the CSM [Council Of Stellar Management] regularly, and the reception has been cautious on their behalf, especially in the beginning… But since the last Fanfest when we opened up all of our plans and started working actively with the CSM community on messaging this properly, things have been extremely positive. I mean, there's always someone – a naysayer – but I think the majority of them are happy about this. They've already started recruiting *Dust* players; *Dust* players have started recruiting *EVE* players – it's started.

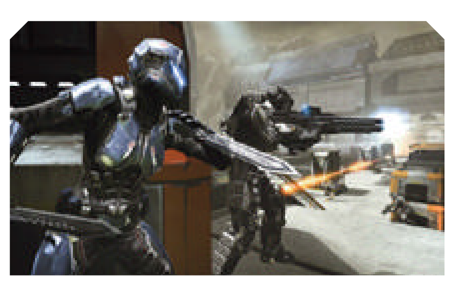
***Dust* is quite complex as modern FPS games go – do you think this might alienate some gamers?**
We're actively [working] on things to make them more accessible – new player experiences, tutorials, stuff like that – we've already made lots of changes from the beta, making it more accessible. I think that it is important to note that we have matchmaking, we have fair and balanced matches, we have an experience for people that are used to more traditional console FPSs, or maybe only want that experience but like the *EVE* world and the style of the game, the weapons and so on – we will have that for them, absolutely.

But it's our hope – our belief – that because of the peripheral concerns, the more meta-gaming players, the corporations, the EVE Link and all that sort of stuff, that they will be drawn in. Maybe they don't know yet that they're MMO players – but they'll figure out really soon 'I'm an MMO player because I saw this stuff happen in the periphery and I want to be a part of it', or they will simply confirm they are not MMO players and they just want to play the game.

Do you have an expectation of how many players will pick up *EVE* through *Dust*, or how many *EVE* players will move in the opposite direction?
We expect some overlap between communities and we already see some – we have *EVE* players on *Dust* and *Dust* players on *EVE* – but that's not really the important bit. It's awesome that people are playing both games and power-playing on that level, but that's not our goal. Our goal is to create a solid MMO first-person shooter experience and, of course, further *EVE*.

Is there anything from *EVE Online* that has made the development of *Dust 514* more difficult?
No. We're all long-term *EVE* players ourselves, we've worked on *EVE* and come up with most of those features. I can't think of any mechanic… what we've needed to fix, we've already fixed – that's the prerogative of an MMO – but, no. *EVE* is not perfect, we're constantly fixing and expanding it with the help of the community, but I can't think of any particular mechanic. I guess, on a low level, there's things that have slowed us down a little bit that we've had to fix – and the same on the *Dust* side, we've had to take a couple of different versions because *EVE* decided to go in a different way – but that's technical stuff: it doesn't really matter. What matters is the experience, and from an experience standpoint we're really happy with *EVE* and how the games are melding.

> "Our goal is to create a solid MMO first-person shooter experience and, of course, further EVE"





EVE players are able to assist *Dust 514* combatants from space, blasting enemies with powerful attacks from the stars.



Imagine Publishing Ltd
Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill,
Bournemouth, Dorset, BH2 6EZ
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586200
Web: www.imagine-publishing.co.uk
www.gamestm.co.uk
www.greatdigitalmags.com

Magazine team
Editor In Chief Nick Roberts
nick.roberts@imagine-publishing.co.uk
☎ 01202 586256
Staff Writer David Scarborough
Staff Writer Josh West
Senior Art Editor Greg Whitaker
Assistant Designer Perry Wardell-Wicks
Sub Editor Rebecca Richards
Head of Publishing Aaron Asadi
Head of Design Ross Andrews

Contributors
Luke Albigés, Sam Bandah, Ben Biggs, Adam Barnes, Steve Burns, David Crookes, Jon Denton, Ian Dransfield, Dan Griliopoulos, Stuart Hunt, Darran Jones, Phil King, Ryan King, David Lynch, Jay MGregor, Damian McFerran, Chris McMahon, Emily Morganti, Graeme Nicholson, Rick Porter, Sam Roberts, Chris Schilling, Aoife Wilson

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Advertising
Digital or printed media packs are available on request.
Head of Sales Hang Deretz
☎ 01202 586442
hang.deretz@imagine-publishing.co.uk
Sales Executive Richard Rust
☎ 01202 586436
richard.rust@imagine-publishing.co.uk

International
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Head of International Licensing Cathy Blackman
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586401
licensing@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Subscriptions
For subscription enquiries email:
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Head of Subscriptions Lucy Nash
subscriptions@imagine-publishing.co.uk
☎ UK 0844 848 8429
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Circulation
Head of Circulation Darren Pearce
☎ 01202 586200

Production
Production Director Jane Hawkins
☎ 01202 586200

Founders
Group Managing Director Damian Butt
Group Finance & Commerical Director Steven Boyd
Group Creative Director Mark Kendrick

Printing & Distribution
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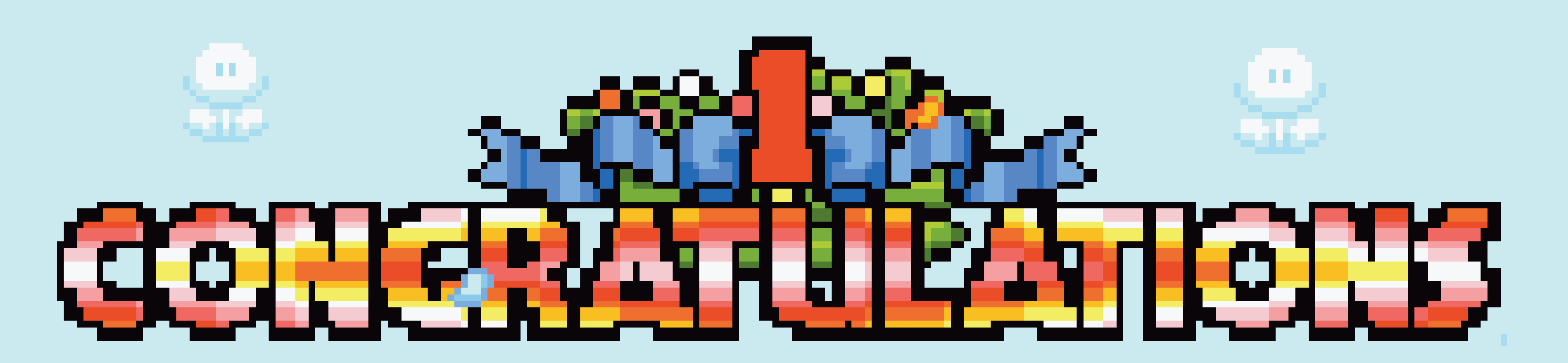









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